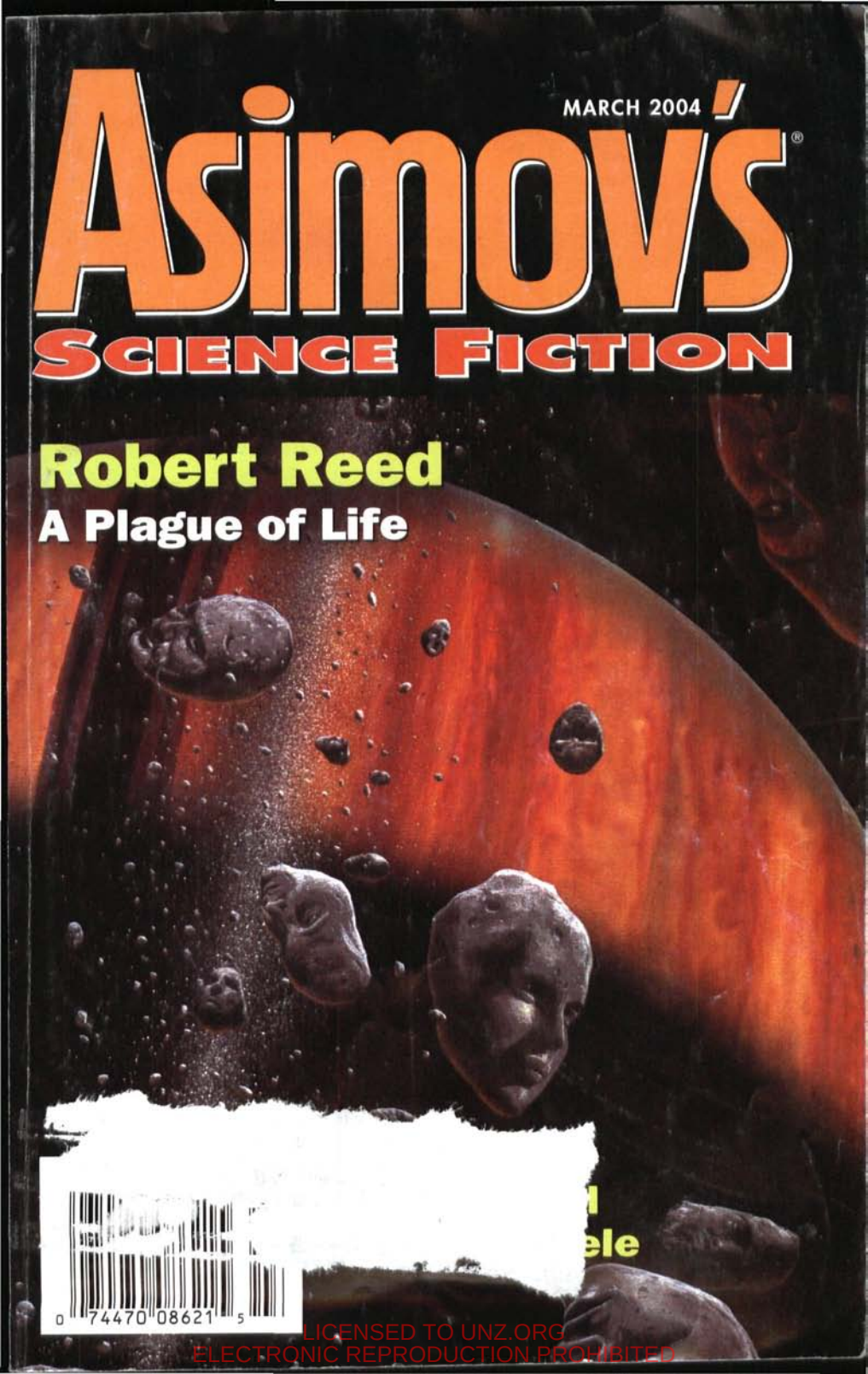

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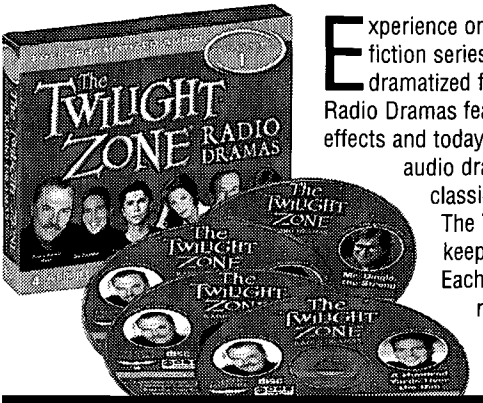

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Asimov's Science Fiction

MARCH 2004

Vol. 28 No. 3
(Whole Number 338)

Next Issue on Sale March 9, 2004

Cover Art by Michael Carroll

Novella

102 Under the Flag of Night . . . . . Ian McDowell

Novelette

8 A Plague of Life . . . . . Robert Reed

Short Stories

36 Pulp Cover . . . . . Gene Wolfe

44 What She Left Behind . . . . . Sarah A. Hoyt

56 Jagganath . . . . . Richard Flood

70 Tammy Pendant . . . . . Chris Beckett

84 Thompson's Ferry . . . . . Allen M. Steele

97 The Saint . . . . . Phillip C. Jennings

Poetry

55 Sunday at the Virtual Beach . . . . . G.O. Clark

69 A Poem Reminding Schoolchildren of the Wonders of Astronomy . . . . . Timons Esaias

83 Knot . . . . . Timons Esaias

96 An Unfortunate Side Effect . . . . . Timons Esaias

101 Unpublicized! . . . . . Timons Esaias

Departments

4 Reflections: Fragments Out of Time: Two . . . . . Robert Silverberg

134 Guest Review: The Feature Films of Hayao Miyazaki . . . . . Alice K. Turner

142 The SF Conventional Calendar . . . . . Erwin S. Strauss

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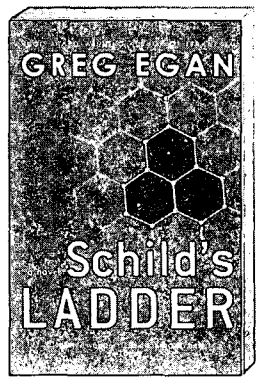

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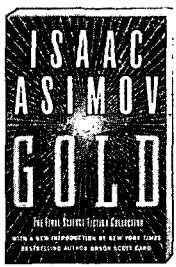

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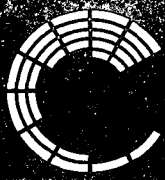

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

FRAGMENTS OUT OF TIME: TWO

I devoted last month's column to a discussion of a book I had come across that contained translations of the surviving fragments of the lost plays of the great and prolific Greek playwright Sophocles: bits and snippets rescued from the jaws of time, tiny pieces of otherwise vanished masterpieces by the author of the *Oedipus* plays and *Electra*.

Some had survived because they had been quoted by later Greek writers whose own works had come down to us; others have turned up on papyri excavated from the Egyptian desert by modern archaeologists. But in no case do we have anything like a complete text of any of those hundred-odd lost plays. Nothing that remains provides more than the merest suggestion of the power and grandeur that those plays must have had. And I ended last month's piece with the thought that our own literary treasures, preserved as they are on impermanent paper and, more recently, in digital form that may well be undecipherable a generation from now, may not survive even as long as the twenty-odd centuries that the Greek classics have managed.

Hardly had I finished writing my Sophocles essay when further details reached me on how some of those vanished Greek classics came to be discovered. And there's a further nice irony in this part of the story, because it turns out that we have what we have of many such works—Sophocles' lost play "Inachus" among them—because of the thrifty Egyptian habit of using unwanted old papyrus manuscripts as wrapping paper for mummies.

Crocodile mummies, no less, in this case.

The story is centered in the ancient and not very important Egyptian town of Tebtunis, where, for thousands of years, the Nile crocodile was worshiped as a sacred animal. Two Oxford University archaeologists, B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt, working at Tebtunis beginning about 1895, came upon a crocodile cemetery there—a place where the bodies of sacred crocodiles had been carefully mummified by the same process used for human beings and buried in huge numbers.

This was interesting but, let us say, less than thrilling to the archaeologists, for the late nineteenth century was the great era of archaeological treasure-hunting, and the basic goal then was the discovery of splendid artifacts suitable for glorious display in European museums. Mummified crocodiles were not exactly in great demand by those museums. One of the Grenfell-Hunt team's workmen, disgusted at finding nothing but stacks of useless crocodile mummies, angrily picked one up and smashed it in pieces—thus revealing a papyrus scroll that had been stuffed down the crocodile's throat more than two thousand years before.

It was already known that the ancient Egyptians had used all sorts of odd scraps of papyrus for wrapping

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mummies. As the early British archaeologist Archibald Sayce explained, "The Egyptian undertaker, before making a mummy-case, bought the waste-paper basket of one of his neighbors, and turned the papers that were in it into papier-mâché for the particular mummy-case he had on hand. Hence it happens that the papyri coming from a particular mummy all belong to the same collection, the cartonnage of one mummy-case, for example, being composed of letters and documents relating to a certain Kleon, that of another of the papers belonging to Diophanes, and so on."

In 323 B.C. Egypt had fallen under the control of Ptolemy, one of Alexander the Great's generals, and for the next three centuries the land of the Nile was ruled by this dynasty of Greek-speaking kings, under whose influence a fusion of Greek and Egyptian culture took place. (It was the Ptolemies who founded the great library at Alexandria, where all the literary resources of the Greek world were stored.) During the Ptolemaic period, therefore, Greek literature was widely circulated in Egypt and a good many discarded Greek texts found their way into the scrap piles of the mummy-makers.

These papyri have been turning up, on and off, ever since European antiquarians began to explore Egyptian sites in the eighteenth century. In the dry climate of Egypt papyrus scrolls survive very nicely, and the papyrus finds of these early archaeologists have added greatly to our knowledge of the ancient world. In 1846, for example, a large roll of papyrus was discovered in the temple of Osiris-Apis at Memphis, containing three of the lost orations of the eloquent Hyperides, whose work had been known only by its reputation until then. Another papyrus yielded a scrap listing the names of victors in the Olympic Games, not only interesting in itself but allowing scholars to fix several doubtful dates in Greek history. Others have given us the earliest known manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments and several apocryphal books of the Bible, and, yes, many fragments of those lost plays of Sophocles that I went on about so vociferously in last month's column.

One great trove of papyri turned up in 1889 in a Ptolemaic cemetery at Gurob in northern Egypt. They were in bad shape, damaged by soaking and gluing during the mummy-making process, and partly nibbled by insects; but careful examination produced the partial text of a lost play of Euripides, a piece of one of Plato's dialogues, and a lengthy section of the *Iliad*. So scholars were already on the alert when the Tebtunis crocodile horde was so inadvertently shown to contain another vast batch of papyri a few years later.

In 1899 and 1900 Grenfell and Hunt worked at Tebtunis under the auspices of the University of California, using funds supplied by Phoebe Hearst, the wife of the silver-mining tycoon George Hearst and the mother of newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. The archaeologists collected a thousand crocodile mummies, thiry-one of which contained papyri with writing on them, and some thirty thousand papyrus documents that had been used as wrappings for human mummies or simply buried in temple storehouses and municipal dumps.

One of the early major finds was a substantial chunk of a play by

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Sophocles—a fragment of a *comedy* by the great tragedian. This is the *Inachus,* which seems to deal with a farcical episode involving a legendary king of the city of Argos. Grenfell and Hunt had earlier found a segment of this play in the desert town of Oxyrhynchus, about 120 miles south of Cairo, and the Tebtunis manuscript provided enough more so that we now have about nine pages of amusing, though incoherent, text. Another significant early find was a narrative of the Trojan War known as *Dictys of Crete,* which purported to be the diary of one of the warriors. It had previously been known only in a Latin version dating from the fourth century A.D. that had been suspected of having been fabricated by its Roman editor, but the discovery of a Greek text in Egypt proved that it was a much more ancient work.

All the Tebtunis material has been stored for the past century at what is now called the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology on the University of California campus in Berkeley and at the university's Bancroft Library nearby. There is so much of it that even after a hundred years it has not been possible to examine and catalog more than a small part of the collection, and some of the papyri, shipped back from Egypt in cigarette tins, have not yet even been unpacked. But in July of 2001 the university set up the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri to study the documents, and the fragile papyri are carefully being opened and translated.

A great deal of what has been examined thus far has turned out to be of only the most minor interest: scraps torn from legal and bureaucratic documents, business letters, account books, inventory records, petitions to local officials, and other such oddments that are mildly interesting in themselves but shed no new light on Egyptian life in the Ptolemaic era. Some literary texts have emerged, too, but most of those duplicate what we have already long possessed—the poems of Homer, for example, or the dialogues of Plato.

But at this point no one knows what else is going to come forth from the Tebtunis papyri. To this date it has been possible to give careful study to only about four percent of the entire trove. Perhaps, in the years ahead, the mummified gullet of one of the Tebtunis crocodiles will yield some powerful scene from yet another of those lost plays of Sophocles, or some other glorious fragment of that golden age of Greek literature.

Meanwhile, not long ago, a writer friend of mine, who like many of my colleagues is getting up there in years, expressed the fear that his work might not be available to readers of future centuries—evidently a serious issue with him.

I was unkind enough to say that this is not among my own major worries, that in fact I was much more concerned with keeping my books in print in the twenty-*first* century, or at least that part of it that I am going to be here for, than in fretting over what was going to happen to them in the twenty-fifth.

But now I see that a solution is at hand for my friend and others like him. The collected works inscribed on papyri—a dozen or so mummified crocodiles of goodly size in which to insert—a cooperative archaeologist to plant the crocs in the basement of some Egyptian temple that's awaiting exploration— O

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A PLAGUE OF LIFE

Robert Reed

Robert Reed reports the following news: "My latest novel is *Sister Alice,* and she just came out from Tor. My two-year-old knows everything, and most questions deserve a 'No' answer. I bought my first new car in fourteen years, thanks in part to *Asimov's.* And I now have a website, which was built by a local SF club. You can reach it by going to *starbaseandromeda.com.* 'A Plague of Life' is the indirect result of watching a couple of million slides taken by my wife's father's family—the pictorial renderings of an important dynasty. They owned a black lab, and though long dead, he is still much loved, and his adventures are the stuff of legend."

It was a remarkable year, my mother has always told me. After a decade of nagging drought and bitter winters, our district found itself immersed in the mildest weather of the century. Wet blankets of snow melted with an early spring that brought nightly rains and warm sunny days free of hail and windstorms, and the following summer was warm as blood and perfectly damp, coaxing every dormant seed and spore to erupt into something green and happy. It was a year where every female hawk laid that second egg, every doe had her little fawn, and our cattle produced veritable lakes of milk and sweet blood. Even Lady dropped two pups in the same miraculous morning, and we kept one of the pups, while the other were sold at a good price to neighbors who knew about Lady's excellence. I was conceived during that exceptional summer. Mother always implied that I was planned, while my older half-siblings preferred to joke about wine and my father's youth and the interdiction of the Almighty. Whatever the reason, I was born the following year—a final blessing from a

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spendthrift time. My father very much adored me. People have always said so, and in the photographs and grainy films, he seems very much the doting father, and I am his giggling little girl, each smiling at the other in almost every surviving scene. Father was big and handsome, with the sharp features that only the youngest men possess. He was a teaser and a joker, and he could work hard from dawn to dark, which I suppose was one reason why my grandfather allowed the marriage. Father was a good man, too. I can't remember anyone saying otherwise, at least in my presence. He had a voice born for singing. He had a jolly attitude that I failed to inherit. He was smart in certain ways, particularly with machines. I wish there were more photographs and films showing him, but in our extensive family archives, for that particular period, the one who garnered the most attention was Lady.

A wonderful dog is a treasure. Grandfather says so, and it's hard not to believe him. In those times, our daily newspaper was delivered by airplane. A local man named Bergen—fearless and foolish in equal measure—would fly over each of the scattered farmsteads, dropping a tightly bound paper through a slot cut through the cabin floor. I don't know how many times the camera caught a glimpse of wings and then focused on Lady as she galloped across the yard, returning moments later with the paper in her mouth, bringing her prize up to the main house, always wagging her long stiff tail. But that was just a minor trick in her repertoire. Lady was old enough and smart enough to understand a fair portion of what she heard, and she was extremely skillful in killing rats and rabbits In season, she was a champion bird dog, and in every season, her loyalty to my grandfather and the rest of our family was a subject of unalloyed pride. One day, while Lady and my father were walking near the highway on the east edge of our farm, strangers drove up, dressed to hunt. They had come all the way from the city. There were two or three or four of them, depending on who tells it. But everyone agrees that they were from that portion of the city that people such as us don't frequent. My father, being good-natured, spoke to them for a while. They asked about Lady. He told a few stories. They asked if they could hunt the land, and Father allowed that it wasn't his decision to make, waving them up to the main house. My grandfather stepped out onto the porch and looked at them and politely told them, "No." Mostly, that's the way the story is told. He told them, "No," and then the disappointed men drove away, a tail of dust rising high into the bright autumn air.

A day later, Lady turned up missing.

She had never run away, and never would. Own a dog for as long as Grandfather had Lady, and there is no way the animal can surprise you. Of course she could have been hurt or killed somewhere on the property, but one of her gifts was a lifelong capacity to evade harm. Her mostly grown pup, Precious, did his best to find her. But there was nothing to find but some mysterious tire tracks on a dirt lane. Accompanied by my father and uncles, Grandfather journeyed to the city for the first time in years. The actual details of their adventures have always remained mysterious and intriguing. Whatever happened, they were gone for two days and nights, and when they came home again, Lady was riding on the seat

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beside the old man. Unharmed and perhaps a little wiser, the grateful dog ran between the houses for most of the afternoon, and according to my mother's telling, I chased after her until I was exhausted, collapsing into a soft stack of hay and sleeping past dinner.

The world settled down for the next weeks. Autumn turned to winter, and one cold morning, my father went out by himself to check on our blood cattle. From the physical evidence, he must have been standing within sight of the highway, and someone armed with a deer rifle put a slug into his exposed neck, and then as he lay on the ground, bleeding to death, they shot him just beneath his armored vest, in the guts, making certain that his last moments would be exceptionally miserable.

The murderer was never caught.

"We tried," Mother tells me on occasion. Speaking with a philosophical resignation, she says, "The police did their best. But those people, that neighborhood . . . it's very difficult to learn anything . . . the kinds of people they are, and so clannish too. . . . "

About the murder, I remember nothing.

Except for everything that I have been told, of course, and everything that I can see for myself.

Lady is still a wonderful dog. Her son died long ago, the victim of too much bravery and some very thin ice. But Lady remains healthy and happy. More than a century has passed, but on those rare occasions when I come home, I make a point of looking into those golden eyes, wondering: Do you remember your adventure? What did you think about the city and those strange people? And do you know, Lady . . . can you remember . . . what were the exact words Grandfather used when he told the strangers to get off his land. . . ?

I return home only for the best reasons. At this point, it takes three reasons to compel me to make the considerable journey.

My mother isn't well, which is the perennial motivation. Despite a robust bloodline, she suffers from a slow decay of function—mostly in her muscles, but increasingly in her mind too. She claims that she needs me. I am her only surviving daughter, and nobody else understands or has patience when it comes to an ancient woman. She suffers from tenacious fears and enduring panics. Modern medicines help—antioxidants and tailored enzymes—and if you chart her decay against the growth of biochemical knowledge, I suspect that she will pass out of this crisis in another five or six decades. But a daughter can take nothing for granted, and she is my mother. Of course I will come visit her. It is my duty to hold her hand and listen dutifully while she repeats stories that have been repeated too many times, and in exactly the same way, acquiring a stonelike reality of their own, immune to questions or the tiniest doubt.

Usually my family supplies my second reason to visit. On a world increasingly tiny and crowded, they have maintained possession over an exceptionally rich expanse of soil and water. The farm is a business. The business supplies food for thousands of city-trapped souls. As a minor shareholder, I am required on rare occasions to show my face, casting my little vote in some officious matter that keeps the legal machinery of the

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farm running smoothly. As a token of his appreciation, my grandfather usually pays for my journey home. But his charity has limits, and leaving the farm will always be an insult directed at him. I am required to find my own way back, whether it is a brief ride, or like now, a very long flight.

Finally, I need some personal reason to make the journey. Perhaps I'll bring a new man, or maybe some personal success has come to me. Success still finds me, although not nearly as often as when I was young. What matters—what is essential here—is that I bring along something about which I can brag. My self-esteem demands it. If I have to sit with my half-brothers and uncles and aunts, plus my endless cousins and nephews and nieces, then I need some good reason to be prideful and self-assured.

"It's so brown down there," says my reason. My perfect little son. He glances at me, and winks, and says, "I know it's winter. I know. But I mean . . . doesn't it seem awfully dead down there? Doesn't it to you, Mom?"

There are no roads anymore. Every lane has been plowed under and planted. Even the old highway has been replaced with a single elevated rail to carry freight or the patient traveler. The land is simply too valuable to waste beneath strips of hard pavement, and it is too productive to be set aside as mere parkland, and there is always the extended family hungry for any income that can be wrung from sun and soil. To travel is to ride one of the spider-legged farm machines, or to walk on your own trustworthy legs. Or with a dose of bravery, you can fly. In the last century, air travel has become a deeply safe business. But there will always be the occasional catastrophe. Only when your multirotor has safely landed can you breathe easier; all of your remaining worries are very much your own.

"It's cold," Jacob says. Not as a complaint, but as an observation. "I don't think I've ever been this cold, Mom."

But this is nothing like the winters of old.

"Is that Lady?" my son inquires.

The ancient dog approaches warily, dipping her head and pinning back her ears, telling the world that she is harmless. Quietly, I say, "You remember me," and she responds by dropping to her belly and crawling close. Born before there were fancy breeds, Lady is a big plain dog with stiff black fur and burly shoulders and a mind that has retained its canine flexibilities. "Good girl," I sing, scratching behind those laid-back ears. "Good, Lady."

Jacob helps with the scratching.

A voice announces, "He wants to see you."

Uncle Ethan stands behind us. What might be confused for a smile shows on the wide strong face, and hands bigger than seem right begin to gather up our little bit of luggage. As always, he is dressed for work. I have rarely seen him any other way. His clothes are rough and padded, the modern armor protecting his chest and head. The resemblance to a soldier is understandable. Even on a modern farm, machines can explode without warning, and sharp tools might fly in unwelcome directions.

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"How are you?" I ask.

The smile brightens, if only a little.

"This is Jacob," I say.

My boy nods and grins and says, "Hello, sir."

"I'm well enough," Ethan says, answering my polite question. And then he stares at his great-nephew, measuring him in some fashion or another before saying, "Good to meet you, boy."

My natural first step is toward the main house.

"No," says Ethan. "He's waiting up at the old blood barn."

I don't care where he waits. With a shake of the head, I admit, "I want to see my mother."

Ethan has never been overly clever, or much of an actor, either. He has been coached, and with an obvious duplicity tells me, "Your mother's sleeping now." Then in case that isn't adequate, he repeats himself. "He's waiting for you. In the barn." One arm points up the hill, a pair of traveling bags lifted high. "Walk through. You'll see. There's a new gymnasium at the back."

I have no choice, it seems.

As we walk away, Jacob tugs at my arm. "How old is he?"

Where we live—the only place Jacob has ever known—I am considered to be a rather old woman.

"Is Ethan as old as Grandma?" he inquires.

"Older." Then I remind him, "They had different mothers. He's only your great half-uncle. Understood?"

"How old?"

"Seven," I begin to say. But that's what I was told when I was a girl. Adding my own age, I admit, "No, he's better than eight now. Probably nearly nine hundred years old, I suppose."

Jacob considers that span of time.

I could offer more, but I don't. Instead, I lead us up to the barn—a massive structure built of limestone boulders and oak timbers and black slate shingles. The interior is spacious and brightly lit, both by the low winter sun that pours through the open door and by the halogen lamps dangling from the distant ceiling. Old-style barns are picturesque but quite incompetent when it comes to today's agriculture. Modern machines need different proportions, while modern milking and bleeding operations have their own rigorous requirements. In a place where blood was once let and bottled, a kind of zoo has taken hold. I recognize the twin plow horses and the huddle of black-and-white milk cattle, and I suppose I should know the blood cattle, although the ancient herd always had a sameness about them—burly aurochs with long horns slicing at the air, their tawny color lending them a kind of anonymity. The rest of the herd was slaughtered decades ago, replaced by a series of more productive breeds. The last three aurochs happened to be my grandfather's favorites, which is why they have been sequestered in this little prison, fed a livable quantity of grain and hay, and kept safe—thousand-pound mementos of a mostly lost epoch.

I fully intend to stop and talk to the beasts. Anything to delay the inevitable. But Lady gallops past, barking with a certain pitch, and from

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behind a new wall at the back of the barn, a man hollers, "Who is it, Lady? Is it Hannah?"

The next bark might mean, "Yes."

It is a game. Grandfather pretends to speak to his dog, just as he pretends not to know who is at his door. With a booming voice, he calls out, "Come in here, Hannah. Let me see that great-grandson of mine!"

Jacob glances at me, and grins.

Why shouldn't the boy feel excited? Knowing what he does about the old patriarch . . . how can my son be anything but thrilled. . . ?

My mother has always been handsome enough, but she fully admits that my beauty comes directly from my father. When I was a young woman of thirty, it seemed natural to pursue acting. Against my family's wishes I left home, and against every expectation found success—if only for the first decade or two. In all, I appeared in half a hundred early films. If the roles weren't large, at least I enjoyed a comfortable life. When the roles were important, I managed not to embarrass myself too badly. The classic outlets still show my likeness, in silvery grays or reenergized colors. But there always comes the day when the public's tastes change, and that was the day I woke to discover that nobody needed a willowy beauty who wasn't quite a household name and who really, if the truth was told, had only a modest talent with acting.

Some years later, in a particularly awful decade, a man appeared. He claimed that he was a devoted fan of my work. He told me he was some kind of researcher, and he would pay for a sample of my blood. It wasn't an enormous sum, but it felt like a windfall. When the transaction was finished, he slipped the dark vial of blood into a small cooler, and with a nervous little voice, he told me, "I've adored you. Your movies. Your presence. I think your work has always been badly underrated."

Those last words always ring hollow for me. Is it genuine praise, or is it simply a measure of how minimal my career seems to the half-informed?

Nonetheless, I told him, "Thank you."

"I would love . . . if I could . . . take you to dinner, Miss Cross. . . . "

"I'm sure you would," I countered. "But more to the point, I think what you want is to go to bed with me."

His face flushed.

"Say it," I pressed. "Where's the harm in admitting the truth?"

"I guess that's true enough. Yes."

"How much money do you have?"

It was such a horrible time in my life. On occasion, particularly when the rent was due, I resorted to using my face and willowy body.

The adoring man named a figure.

With a frank voice, I explained what that amount entitled him to do.

For a long while, he could do nothing but tremble. Then lust and years of fond daydreams took hold, and with a shy dip of the face, he agreed to my terms. Together, we walked to the far side of my little one-room apartment and lay down, and I listened to the rumbling of the trains and the singing of city horns, and when it was finished, he happily collapsed on top of me.

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"Why?" I finally asked.

"Because you have a rare beauty," he professed. "I don't think they saw your talents. The directors didn't, I mean." He couldn't stop explaining the wrong turns my little life had taken. "You shouldn't have been the nice girl or the heroine's pretty friend. What you should have been, I think, is a criminal. A rogue. The serenely cold villainess who can enslave a man with a glance."

I let that thought percolate deep. Then with a reproachful voice, I admitted, "But that isn't what I'm asking. I want to know, why do you want my blood?"

About those matters, he was less forthcoming.

But then I made a third business arrangement with him—actions given for knowledge—and while I used my mouth, he stared at my cracked plaster ceiling, talking with a distant, distracted voice that slowed and then stopped entirely, and then began again. He told me about plotting the genetics of humans on every continent. He spoke in dense, nearly impenetrable terms about marker genes and common traits, maternal mitochondria and still-warm mutations. Then after I finished my portion of the bargain, he lifted his face and stared at me, eyes blurred and his voice edging toward sleep.

"Your grandfather," he said.

He said, "Nathaniel Cross," with an eerie delight.

"What about him?"

"Do you know? How long has he been alive?"

"Thirteen, maybe fourteen centuries." But that seemed to amuse the researcher, forcing me to explain, "That's what I've been told. My mother says so. Grandfather says so. Everybody claims he was born early in the Dark Age, on the island of Malta."

"He is a very long-lived person. Isn't he?" The man grinned, asking, "Can you imagine what he has endured? The wars. The plagues. Famines, and every stupid accident. Do you know the odds against surviving through the last fourteen centuries?"

"Rather poor," I allowed.

"Life used to be endlessly dangerous," he reminded me.

With a voice edging toward respectful, I told him, "My grandfather's better than most when it comes to survival."

"Yes," he agreed. "Without question."

Then with a cool hand, he touched me. And with a conspirator's quiet voice, he admitted, "I shouldn't tell you any of this."

"What?"

"This project of ours. . . . " He hesitated, achieving a useful melodrama. "We're investigating patterns in human genetics. Patterns treated with elaborate algorithms. And there seem to be several distinct footprints . . . geneprints, we call them . . . left behind by the same few enduring people."

"What people?"

"Always men," he explained. "Since a woman's fertility is limited, and childbirth can be dangerous—"

"What about my grandfather?"

"We've tried," he said. "But he won't let us test him, or anyone living on

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the farm. Not that it matters much. We're already quite sure that you've got relatives scattered across the New World, and Europe, as well as Asia and Africa, too."

"We all have our distant cousins," I began.

"Have you ever been to the Nile? No? Well, if you ever find yourself in the New Kingdom, remember this: The entire population is made up of your distant cousins."

"What are you saying? Grandfather isn't fourteen—?"

"He's closer to five thousand years old," my new lover blurted. "And that's the minimal figure." Then he tried to cuddle with me, and I endured his touch, listening to the happy wet voice. "He might even be older," he admitted. "Really, we can't decide. But he's definitely one of our prime candidates to be the oldest human on Earth."

I could never have imagined such a thing.

"Of course, perhaps he doesn't know his own age. The brain forgets as it lives. New neurons replace the old, and over time, memories seem to get washed out of the enduring soul."

"Who was he?" I muttered. "On the Nile . . . was he one of the Twelve Great Pharaohs?"

That brought an easy, irritating chuckle. "No, Hannah," he purred. "All the Pharaohs are accounted for. Large public men and the leaders of empires . . . in troubled times, they and the poor are always the first to die. . . ."

I can't remember my grandfather as anything but fit and imposing. Where some people allow their bodies to gather fat, he works endless hours, on the farm and with weights, maintaining a durable truce with pernicious sloth. As happens with some very old men, his hair has grown thin and retreated. His response is to shave his scalp every morning, long before anyone else is awake. Whatever his real age, he has endured a hard life: His face and torso are crisscrossed with the scars of old cuts and burns that in turn help obscure older, more terrible scars. Portions of two ribs are missing under his right arm. A small toe and the tips of three fingers have also vanished. A nameless infection dulled his left eye, and both knees suffer from a poverty of cartilage that modern medicines and simple rest have never entirely cured. Yet his heart and lungs remain strong and clear, and as we enter the gymnasium, he calls out with those great lungs. "Hello!" he roars, thick arms pressing against a pair of padded levers, a great black block of iron rising from its cradle. Sitting on a narrow bench, bare-chested and vigorous beyond calculation, he says to my son, "Come here, Jacob. Let me get a good look at you, my boy! Finally!"

If my son had wings, he would fly. As it is, he runs toward his great-grandfather, trusting and happy. Both qualities terrify me, yet I say nothing. I watch the old man drop the iron with an almost musical crash and then reach out with both arms, embracing Jacob exactly long enough to convince a boy that he is accepted and perhaps even loved.

"Hello, Hannah. A pleasant trip, was it?"

"Pleasant enough," I allow.

"And thank you. For finally bringing him to us, thank you." Grandfather holds the boy, but he watches me. Not for the first time, I sense that

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his dulled eye sees quite well. Indeed, it could possess some extra vision not given to lesser mortals. That is the eye that cuts into me. From it comes the gaze that always makes me feel sorry and small.

Letting go of Jacob, he tells both of us, "It's wonderful to have you here. I hope you can stay for a very long time."

Then with his powerful arms, he shakes the little ten-year-old. "So what do you think about our farm?"

"It's different," my boy sputters.

"Different? How?"

"It's all brown," Jacob says.

"That's called winter."

"I know, sir."

"You live inside a fancy can," the old man reminds him. "A fancy heated can that always has the sun, and of course you don't need seasons—"

"Yes, sir."

"But then again, this isn't much of a winter, either." A sly smile breaks out on a fact that looks as if it was axed out of a block of tough walnut. "I can remember, you know. Winters so appallingly hard and long that people thought they would never end."

Jacob nods, listening intently.

"The glaciers charged down from the mountains. Crops froze under the late snows. I skated on ice in places that never even see frost today. Everybody prayed to God to save them, and maybe their prayers worked. From what I've read, our world came dangerously close to another ice age. A few degrees colder—one good snow in the middle of a northern summer—and everything would be different now. Everything here would very much be dead."

Jacob nods weakly, imagining all that terrible ice.

"Come here."

Grandfather means Lady. The dog has been sitting to one side, patiently waiting for those words. With a seamless devotion, she walks up and sets her muzzle on his lap, a thin streak of drool leaving a spot on his trousers.

Scratching the dog behind her golden eyes, he tells Jacob, "Look around the farm. Take a little tour."

"I don't think he should," I begin.

"Quiet," Grandfather says, not even bothering with a corrective glance. "Don't touch any machinery, Jacob, and shut every gate you open. Understood? And if you find some little relative—we've got a few kids underfoot these days—be friendly. But explain to them. You don't know anything about a real farm, and if they do anything mean to you, I will be angry."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell them. That I will be very angry."

"I will, sir."

"Now go. Go!"

"Helmet and vest!" I shout after him. "Find yours and wear them—!"

"Yes, Mother," he replies, using his most dismissive tone.

Then it is just the two of us. The three of us. Lady continues to enjoy the scratching of her ears, and the old man continues to study me with

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his dangerous gray eye, and I stand my ground despite nervous feet. Glancing at my surroundings, I observe, "This is new." And when neither companion responds, I add, "Every machine has just the one setting. Doesn't it?"

"So I won't grow weaker," Grandfather responds. "When I lift, I have to endure the same load that I lifted two days ago. And two years ago."

I nod, as if paying close attention.

"You look thin," he says.

I wander over to a distant machine, touching a dangling bar covered with thick foam rubber. A fat steel cable attaches to a mass of black iron that waits inside a cage that helps keep out careless toes and hands.

"What's your gravity up in that can-world?"

"At our apartment?" I shrug. "Eighty percent Earth's."

"That's not enough," he growls. "The boy won't grow up properly. In the bones, the muscles."

"He's growing fine. His school and the parks are near the hull, which is .95 gees."

"And the radiation levels—"

"We have shielding."

"What about the lost bolts and fuel tanks? There's a lot of garbage flying around up there, from what I hear."

I stare back at him. "Honestly, the engineers and the rest of us . . . we take every reasonable precaution. . . . "

He smiles, enjoying my anger.

Then with a quiet, gruff voice, he asks, "Why?"

I pretend not to hear him. But when the furnace cuts on, I flinch.

"Why, Hannah?"

He wears trousers but no shoes. I look at his feet for a moment. Thousands of years of gravity have made them broad and quite ugly.

"Why what?"

"You came here for a purpose. Is it to show off your son?"

I stare at the dark broad chest. "Partly."

"What else?"

Finally, I look at the face. Mustering an expression of nervous courage, I tell him, "I want to sell my share of the farm."

The news is heard, and vanishes.

"How much is it worth?"

He seems to expect my question. Using his most quiet voice, he offers a concrete sum that no force in nature can change.

After a prolonged silence on my part, he adds, "Our farm wears a lot of debt. We've been modernizing again. And we're expanding past the old highway. I loaned money to the Kirks, and they haven't met their payments, so we're using lawyers and the courts to take away a fat chunk of their land." He pauses long enough to smile at his own progress. "Not that we won't pay everything off in another five years, of course. You should see our projected profits. Your profits, too. But right now . . . this couldn't be a worse time to sell out, darling." Then with an accusing, almost raging voice, he asks, "Can you possibly wait?"

"No."

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"Why not?"

I sit on the adjacent machine, pressing my feet against matching pedals. I have always had strong legs, and my knees are perfectly fine. I lift the iron partway, and then feigning weakness, I let it fall again. The crash is still echoing off the rafters when I confess, "I'm buying passage on the Centauri ship. For Jacob and myself."

"But I can't give you nearly enough money." He has to grin, betraying the depth of his knowledge. "With your existing assets, plus your share of the farm, you'll still fall way short of that goal."

I stare at him.

"Hannah," he laughs. "What did you tell yourself? Just because you don't live on this world anymore, do you really believe you can escape my reach?"

I used to grieve for the corn.

When I was little, younger even than Jacob, I invested an entire summer watching that tropical grass grow tall and green, sprouting those long ears covered with a rich golden silk. When the ears ripened and the stalks browned, I assumed that the plants had fallen asleep. Like trees and ground squirrels, our crops were simply hibernating, and come next spring, they would burst from the ground again.

Mother was first with the hard news. A little perplexed, perhaps even disappointed, she said, "No, honey. They're dead. They always die when the frost comes."

"But why?" I asked.

"Just because," she replied. Never a person to concern herself with the deep workings of the world, she shook her head and shrugged, saying, "Because that's the way it is, honey. And will you stop crying now, please?"

Grandfather was more informative, and more horrible.

"Plants have that trait in their blood. I mean, in their sap." He laughed at the image of bloody corn. "At least some of the species have it. Annuals, they're called. They know they'll live for one good year, so they throw all their energy into making sugary seeds that can grow like mad next spring, making new plants. Those seeds can feed us, if they happen to be our crops. Which is a good thing. If we had nothing to cultivate but perennial grasses and berry bushes and fruit trees . . . well, there couldn't be nearly so many people in the world. . . ."

That was too much for a little girl to comprehend, and looking back, I probably don't remember it correctly. Every school lecture and everything that I have read since has been grafted into my shadowy memories of that uncomfortable instant.

Regardless of the truth, what I remember is the old man telling me, "Animals aren't the same as corn. Fish and turtles, and people, and mice, too. We just live and live. Because there's no real reason to do otherwise."

"Why's that?"

He laughed at me, his good eye narrowing. "I've read a few things." Grandfather read exhaustively on many subjects. "The idea is that we could have been otherwise. This is just the way we happened to evolve. Early on, the first animals stumbled into metabolic pathways that avoid

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oxidation poisoning and the planned collapse that comes to the corn. You see? Then if a turtle or a man is very successful, he gets to live for a long time, leaving behind many turtles, and many children, too. When and if he ever happens to die."

"But if things were different?" I asked. Not then, but some years later. I remember a different conversation where I was a studious schoolgirl, asking that simple question, "What if we were like the corn?"

"Planned insolvency? Well, that would change a few things. But not as much as you'd guess. Not over the long course of evolution, at least." He gave the matter some thought before adding, "For most of my life, it seemed like everybody was dying. Wars killed thousands. Every epidemic killed millions. And there was bad food or no food, and you can't imagine all the ways you could die just in the normal course of your day."

"My uncles survived, too," I pointed out.

"Some have, yes. The ones you know, and a few others." A vague smile softened his features. "We are a family, Hannah. We care for each other. Which helps us survive, of course. And I don't think it hurts that when these new continents were being settled . . . with all this empty land free for the having . . . that I decided to move our family here, escaping the crowded guts of Europe. . . . "

We emigrated barely two centuries ago. Practically yesterday, in my grandfather's mind. "So much has changed in these last years," he told me. Then with an easy menace, he explained, "The old killing diseases have been conquered. And our food is clean and unspoiled. We have sewers and hospitals. And what nation can raise a willing army when its citizens can seriously entertain the prospect of a ten thousand year life?" He sighed and shook his head, saying, "This is a new world. A dangerous, foolhardy world, some would think."

"Why?" I asked.

"You love that word. Don't you, Hannah? 'Why?' "

"But what's wrong?" I persisted. "Isn't it good that people don't get sick anymore?"

Grandfather gestured at the cornfield. It was another summer, and both the crops and I were half-grown. "All right," he grumbled. "Imagine this. The corn doesn't live a little while and die. But it still makes seeds by the hundreds and spreads them under its feet. How can that be a good thing? You are a prosperous plant. But suddenly all these children are springing up between your toes." Disgusted, he pushed the image aside. "If that happens, you have two choices, Hannah. Two courses you can take. And believe me, neither choice is even a little bit pretty."

Mother sits in a wide, thickly padded rocking chair. Her weaknesses are many, but her face remains handsome, almost girlish. With a voice almost too soft to be heard, she asks about the journey back to Earth. Was I ever scared? Then she reminds me about the shuttles that have malfunctioned in the past, and the people dead after taking what seemed to be the most inconsequential of risks.

"Those were the old shuttles," I reply. "The new models are as reliable as a heart."

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"He died, you know."

"Who do you mean?"

She rocks the chair and moves her stronger arm, a faded quilt falling away from her badly shriveled shoulder. "Mr. Bergen. He would bring us our newspaper in the airplane. One morning, he flew down low and dropped the paper . . . and then one of his wings fell off, and he crashed. . . . "

"It's a sad story," I agree.

"Flying," she says. Just the one word, and it causes her to shiver.

Like a dutiful daughter, I lift the quilt over the shoulder, and not for the first time, I wonder if death might be kinder than a tiny, endless existence full of mismatched memories and the occasional meal.

"Be careful," she advises.

"I will be."

"In the sky . . . be careful. . . . "

Since my last visit, her hair has thinned noticeably and turned a little white. New teeth are sluggishly filling the holes in pale pink gums. Her breath smells of stale milk and blood cake. Because she can't sit comfortably at the family table, she has already been fed for the night. Because she sleeps so poorly nowadays, a strong pair of my cousins will put her to bed in a little while. This is our chance to talk, or at least to make the attempt.

"Tell me," I whisper.

The words aren't noticed. But then, after a long pause, the girlish face brightens. "Tell you what?"

"About my father."

She appears perfectly lucid, and then she speaks. "He was an English count. A gorgeous man. Tall and wealthy, and wonderful on horseback—"

"That's a different husband," I warn. "An earlier husband."

"Was he?" She seems to doubt me before she doubts herself. But then with a gentle resignation, she admits, "That daughter died. I remember. While she was a baby. Something attacked her lungs."

"I know the story, Mother."

"You want to hear about your father?"

"Your last husband," I prod.

With a chiding smile, she says, "Hannah. I do remember him. Better than you ever can, I should think."

Father had a young man's talent for machines. He was gregarious and quick-witted, stronger than most, and perhaps better than anyone my mother had ever known, he could remember faces and the names that belonged to each one. But as older, grumpier souls would point out, young men simply haven't seen that many faces in their little lives. Perhaps if he had survived until today, my father's talents would have begun to fade. Every face would resemble every other, and he would fumble over names, and our modern machinery would have seemed as sophisticated and impenetrable as the fatty insides of a human mind.

The farm needed a good, cheap mechanic. As the story goes, Uncle Ethan paid the newspaper to run an advertisement for a full week, and after Mr. Bergen flew in low and dropped the paper, and after Lady had

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carried the paper up to the front porch, Ethan took a break from his morning chores, sitting out on the mesh-enclosed porch, drinking cold coffee and reading the headlines with his usual indifference to most of the world. What did it matter, the elections in Asia? Who cared about the drought in Africa, or the borders shifting in Old Europe? Not even sports scores or lurid murders captured his minimal imagination. He read only for the most basic reason: Habit. He read because his own father might bring up one of these many subjects in conversation, and he didn't want to appear stupid. And then after a few minutes of studious apathy, Ethan thought to look into the back pages, scanning down the narrow columns to find a single entry—WANTED, MECHANIC FOR NEW TRACTORS, TRUCKS, GENERATORS, WELL-PUMPS—that he read with care, twice, before hearing a big throat clearing itself.

As the story goes, my father was the one who cleared his throat. Uncle Ethan dropped the want ads to find himself staring at a young fellow not yet thirty years old.

"What do you want?" the old grouch barked.

"Wealth and fame," the stranger replied. Then with a big laugh, he added, "But for now, I'll take the mechanic's job. If it's still open."

Ethan was astonished—a very rare condition for him. Jabbing at the paper, he said, "This ad just got in here. Today. This is the first day." To be sure, he looked again, twice, before repeating his reasons for being astonished. "How can you be here already? I just got the damned paper!"

"There's different editions," the stranger remarked with a shrug. "In the city, there's a midnight edition. When I read the ad, I jumped on the last train, and I got off at Little Bend, and I've walking ever since."

Ethan chewed on that explanation. "Is that so?"

"I want this job," the man-child continued. "It's tough times. I need work. I didn't want to come all this way and find the job filled. You see my point?"

A habitually neat man, Ethan folded the paper and set it on the table beside his empty coffee mug, and he rose, saying, "You'll need a helmet and jacket, if you want to work here. For our protection. Whatever happens, we don't need some stupid lawsuit chewing us in the ass."

"I wouldn't sue," the young man promised. "But yeah, I've got a work helmet and a good second-hand jacket. There's a hole in it, but the guy who was wearing it is still alive. So it must work, huh?"

Ethan didn't hear the humor, and even if he had, he wouldn't have laughed.

"I've got my résumé. You want to see it?"

"Yes." With a slow, studious eye, Ethan examined the brief list of past employers. Most of the businesses were defunct, casualties of the long economic downturn.

Silence seemed to bother the stranger. With a grin, he offered, "This is a beautiful farm. And a beautiful house, too."

Ethan heard the compliments and chose to ignore them. With a crisp, "Stay here," he took the résumé inside. His father was sitting in the front room, in his favorite chair. The burly bald man read the single sheet in a glance, and then he looked out the window, investing more time assess-

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ing the boyish face and the quick bright eyes. Finally, with a low rumble, he said, "It's your decision. What do you think?"

"I don't like him," Ethan replied.

With a hard little smile, Grandfather reminded his son, "You've never been a good judge of people."

True enough.

"You want to hire him?"

"On a trial basis," Ethan allowed.

"What isn't?" Grandfather replied, laughing at him. "What the hell isn't?"

Ethan walked back outside. In crisp, distinctly unfriendly terms, he described the job while giving the new man a brief tour of the farmstead. To a farmer who had spent centuries working with beasts of burden, the new tractors seemed like abominations, insults and dangerous beyond measure. The two of them ended up outside the old blood barn, watching a herd of draft horses stand in the cool sunshine. Two of the horses were better than two centuries old—a famous team brought with the Cross family from the old country. On its worst day, a balky tractor could do ten times the work of that pair of animals, and that was why in another year or two, decisions would be made. The oldest horses would remain. But Grandfather didn't have a fondness for creatures without a clear purpose, which meant that their children would be killed and used for that rare commodity: Meat. Perhaps Ethan was thinking about their fate as he stared at them. It is possible that he was sad, or angry, or maybe he was distracted for entirely different reasons. Whatever was happening inside his mind, he barely noticed when the new man nudged him, asking, "So now who's she?"

"Who?" Ethan sputtered, gazing across the big pen. "Which she do you mean?"

"I'm not talking about horses. I mean her." He pointed toward a woman walking from the main house to one of the nearby cottages. "Who's that girl over there?"

"Girl?" Finally, Ethan laughed aloud. "That's my half-sister, and she isn't. A girl, I mean. Shit, she's almost as old as me!"

"Well," the new man ventured, "she looks young enough."

"Young enough for what?" A menace intruded into the constant laugh. "Hey, she's been a widow eight times. No, make that nine times."

"Is she a widow now?"

It took Ethan a few seconds to completely decipher the question. Then with a shrug and a disdainful sneer, he admitted, "Yeah, she's alone. But you don't want to have any ideas about that. Are you listening?"

The new man nodded and smiled, watching the widow walk.

"And we were married within the year," my mother boasts.

I nod, and smile.

"He made me so happy, your father did." Her smile has a practiced quality, bright but wrapped snug around nothing but habit. "That's why I got pregnant with you. Happiness always makes a girl fertile."

I say, "I know."

Then with a different tone, I ask, "What did Grandfather think about my father?"

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The question seems to puzzle her.

"Compared to your other husbands, I mean—"

"Oh," she exclaims. And with a deep, thoughtful sigh, she admits, "He liked them all equally well. I'm sure of that."

Ten dead men, I think.

But I just smile, saying nothing at all.

Before my mother is put to bed, I manage to corral Jacob, allowing the two of them to meet. The boy is on his best behavior, while Mother seems unsure as to whose hand is being offered. But the moment has a sweetness, and at least one of us is able to walk away happy.

Smiling, I lead Jacob downstairs, joining the rest of the family in the dining hall. Supper is enormous and simple. Eggs and milk, cornmeal and blood, have been swirled together with an array of vegetables, baked to gold, then covered in honey and served with pitchers of weak beer and whole milk. Two chairs have been reserved at the main table. Conventions born long before me demand a strict formality. Conversations are determined and self-conscious. Adults discuss the day-by-day business of the farm—the needs of various machines and livestock, and who is responsible for what—while the little half-cousins near Jacob whisper about school and various friends that he will never meet. Ethan invests his time staring at the hall's enormous window, nothing to see outside but darkness, eating little bites and otherwise holding his tongue still. Finally, Grandfather finishes his meal, and setting down his fork says, "Hannah," with a voice that carries. With a word, I am made into a real person. And now everyone is free to look at me, and if they wish, smile.

"One of our far flung family members has come home," the ancient man continues. "For too short of a visit, I'm afraid. So while she is here, perhaps somebody has a question for Hannah."

A young man lifts a nervous hand.

I don't have my father's talent for faces and names, but he looks new. Judging by where he sits, he must be Ethan's newest son-in-law.

"I love your movies," he claims.

"Thank you," I reply, with what I hope sounds like genuine pleasure. Then I have to ask, "Which movies?"

The question puzzles him. But one of my aunts leaps into the silence, explaining, "You've taken two stabs at acting. Isn't that right, dear?"

The tone isn't exactly approving, but she is correct.

"I've had two careers," I admit. Then to my admirer, I say, "You probably mean my second career. The one where I played the rathe."

"Yes." With a happy expertise, he names titles. "*The Blood of Life* and *The Milk of Life*. Those are my favorites."

"So what happens in them?"

Of all people, Ethan asks the simple question, displaying what for him is an unusual curiosity.

"Haven't you seen them?" his young son-in-law asks.

"If I have," my uncle replies, "I don't remember it."

"Hannah plays the old mythic creature," the young man explains. "She's a rathe. Which means that she has some weird genetic disorder. If

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she doesn't eat human flesh, her body starts to fall apart. Her skin sags and her teeth stop coming. And eventually, she grows ugly and weak and dies."

For some, the concept brings discomfort. But most people actually smile, revealing the same grim intrigue that helped make my second bout as an actress become such an enormous financial success.

"She lives in an old fortress," my admirer continues. "She lives with men and women who have the same affliction, and they use their beauty to lure in passersby." Shivering with delight, he says, "Very spooky. Very fun."

Again, I say, "Thank you."

Grandfather sits at the far end of the table, one hand unseen. With that hand, he calmly scratches Lady's head, and with his free hand he gestures, bringing the room's attention back to him.

Everyone waits for him to speak.

Hours might pass, and nobody would dare move. That is his power and authority, and perhaps on a different day, he might force everybody to sit, demanding that show of obedience. But not tonight. He is satisfied to shrug his massive shoulders, and with an almost casual voice, he admits, "I should probably watch one of those little films. Just to get a feel for them."

With a few words, my unimportance is plain to see.

Again, nobody looks at me. I am a temporary guest, inconsequential and soon to be forgotten. If only Jacob could sense the mood, then maybe we would escape without further embarrassment. But with his own infectious enthusiasm, my boy shouts out, "You know how to kill my mom? When she's a rathe, I mean."

Too slowly, I say, "Don't—"

"With a golden sword," he explains, one arm whirring above his head. "You have to chop off her head with this big gold sword."

"Really?" Grandfather says.

Then with a low laugh, he exclaims, "What an intriguing image!"

The hotel was perched on top of a tall bank building, the best rooms looking toward the Great Pyramid. History and the modern world stood shoulder to shoulder. Three hundred million souls filled the narrow Nile Valley, from the delta to the reservoir at Aswan. Extensive irrigation projects and draconian building codes left just enough arable farmland to feed most of the people, the shortfalls made up by imports. My grandfather's grain might have helped feed these millions. Certainly each of those hungry mouths could only make the value of his crops increase.

"Are you going to stare out the window all night?"

I said, "Perhaps," and put on a smile, looking back over my shoulder.

My lover sat in the middle of our bed, wearing a fond expression and worried eyes.

"You know," I said, "you could stand here with me."

"Maybe I will. Maybe I won't."

But he couldn't help himself. In another moment, with the padding of bare feet, he slipped in behind me, warm arms wrapped around my waist and his spent prick pressed against my bottom.

Time had reversed our circumstances. I was the famous actress enjoying her reborn career, while he was just another geneticist hoping for a

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fifty-year tenure with any mid-tier university. He had a wife now, and a child, and a world bursting with responsibilities. Yet luring him to this place wasn't difficult. Despite all of our wishing, we can never quite rid ourselves of the affections of our youth.

"You know," I whispered. "You helped me quite a bit, years ago."

"I did?"

He thought of the money he gave me. But I admitted, "No, it was your career advice. It only took me another four decades, but eventually I realized that you were right. I should play the villain."

"Well, then, you're welcome."

"So what have you learned? Since then, I mean."

"Learned?"

"About my grandfather." I pushed back against him, causing the prick to stir. "The big genome project went on for years. I've read some of the results. At least as far as I can follow them. But nothing published actually mentions him—"

"We can't name your grandfather," he interrupted. "The genetic privacy laws strictly forbid that."

"What have you learned?" I asked again.

My lover took a breath, gathering himself. Then with a sorry tone, he admitted, "Very little, really. Since I saw you last . . . well, the man's definitely old, and durable. But how old, and what makes him so durable—"

"Would you like to know?" I interrupted.

He hesitated, his arms lifting off me now.

"Would you like to study his blood?" I asked. "Would that help with your career?"

"Yes, I would like a sample. But I doubt if it would help." He was such an innocent soul. It had finally occurred to him that I was using him, and it would take another few minutes before he grew comfortable with that hard fact. "Hannah," he said, and he breathed again. "Genetics don't mean nearly as much as we'd hoped," he explained. "A person's DNA can be robust, but only to a point. After that, nothing matters but luck and lifestyle. Which is why we dropped our studies with the very long-lived people. We collected enough samples from their descendants—from people like you—that we don't have to directly involve them. And it's been twenty years since the data has given us anything new."

"What about his mitochondria?"

Warm hands settled on my hips, as if to hold me to the ground. "What about his mitochondria?"

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"He inherited them from his mother. Whoever she was. But his children inherited their mitochondria from their mothers. Maybe his are unique. Maybe that's the reason he can be thousands of years old."

"You've been reading," he muttered.

Then with the steady voice of a practiced lecturer, he told me, "Mitochondria are simple, genetically speaking. Maybe there's something unique in your grandfather's organelles. But even if there is, or was, there's always a steady mutation rate. In the course of a long life, a person's mitochondria will have to change in some significant ways."

"What about memes?"

That brought silence, and curiosity.

"You mentioned lifestyle and luck," I said. "But have you ever wondered? Maybe the old man survived all this time because he has certain beliefs, or tricks, or useful ways of thinking. Memes, I mean. Maybe if you could study him, and I mean carefully . . . maybe everybody would learn how to remain young and vital for ten thousand years. . . . "

The hands dropped, but he remained intrigued by the idea.

"Would the man be worth anything to you?" I asked. "Assuming I could actually deliver him, of course."

"Deliver him? Like a package, you mean?"

I didn't explain what I meant.

"That isn't going to happen," he assured me. Or himself. "And really, that kind of psychological work isn't even in my field."

I hadn't thought that any of these schemes would fly. They were just foundations to an assault more basic, more proven. With one hand, I reached behind my back, firmly gripping his testicles and the cool prick. Then with a frankness that couldn't help but work, I said, "I intend to enslave you. Starting now. You're going to be mine to do with as I please."

He laughed, and gulped. "I'm already half-enslaved, darling—"

"But it's not time yet," I continued. "Not this year, or the next decade, probably. But soon. And until then, I'm going to hold you like this. Understand? Like this!"

He winced, saying, "Please."

"All right then."

My corporeal hand let him go, but in every other fashion, I still had a grip on him. Then standing together, we stared out of the window, watching the sun rise over the Nile Valley, those first red-stained rays reaching high. Like each of the Great Pharaohs, Cheops had drunk nothing but water boiled in priestly ceremonies, and he ate a balanced, moderate diet, and only people who passed through a ritual quarantine could share the same room with him. The greatest of all the pharaohs, Cheops had lived for one thousand and fifteen years, and in that span his tomb became a mountain—a giant massif of quarried granite—its slopes kept at a moderate grade to avoid catastrophic collapses, but the pyramid still high enough that the air thinned noticeably on the upper slopes, and when there was moisture in the air, as if on that particular morning, a cluster of sun-reddened clouds gathered around the tiny, sharply pointed summit.

I won't sleep. I don't think that sleep is even possible. With Jacob snor-

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ing peacefully in the bed beside mine, I lie on my back, perfectly alert, counting the minutes and the long hours while marveling at how horribly slow time moves when you stand behind it, shoving hard.

Suddenly my eyes close and remain shut.

What wakes me is a dog barking in the cold night air. Foolishly, I sit upright, the mattress creaking beneath me. But I manage to regain my self-control. I force myself not to look out the window. Quietly, smoothly, I settle back onto the bed, and after another couple of low woofs, the old dog falls silent.

My father's body was cremated, and because he hadn't been married to my mother for the customary twenty years, he wasn't regarded as really belonging to us. That was why his remains were shipped home to certain obscure relatives. That was why I never got a clear answer when I asked for the whereabouts of his urn and ashes.

"There's no grave," my mother used to claim, her nose wrinkling with disgust. "They probably stuck the urn into the back of a closet somewhere. It's sad, I know. Criminal, even. But you see, darling, these people aren't like us. They don't honor their ancestors. And since they breed like weeds, they barely care about their own children."

"What family was his?" I asked.

She willingly gave me a name. Indeed, she believed in that name. But her certainty was too easy, her manner too incurious. When I made my own inquiries, I discovered that my father's family was barely that. A family. There was a genuine name and a wide array of people attached to that arrangement of letters, but who was related to who was a much more complicated and interesting business.

I didn't find my father's earthly remains until my last visit home. Jacob was two years old, safe with friends inside the orbiting habitat. I had already spent the requisite time with my mother, and I'd boasted about my son as much as I dared, and after signing the necessary forms to remain a stockholder in good standing with the family farm, I saw no reason to linger. Claiming a nebulous problem back home, I left three days early. The hired multirotor flew to the city, dropping me at the front gate of the district's main airport. There I hired a driver and two bodyguards, and armed with clues harvested from a multitude of sources, I took a little ride into the heart of the city.

There are larger metropolises, most of them more crowded and poor. But my father's city has its own oppressive touches. Its name was stolen from a native tribe that was eradicated with rifles and smallpox. Little more than two centuries old, it possesses a drab, determined newness that makes it indistinguishable from a thousand other immigrant towns. The immigrants came here to build the railroads. They came to work in the early grain mills and blood mills. From Europe and North Africa, as free citizens and freed slaves, they came and settled, built their homes and raised the first of their families. Four million souls are pressed together on the bluffs above a wide brown river, most of them living in the twenty-story apartment buildings that were built from brick for the first century, and then the forty-story towers built with steel and white con-

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crete. And as you walk the narrow streets, people will gaze at you from the high windows—a certain portion of those faces belonging to the very same immigrants who settled this land, who still speak with rich accents, and in their sleep, still dream in the languages of their vanquished youth.

My father's neighborhood was half a dozen apartment buildings overlooking a cluster of old mills and little factories. His urn and the accompanying nameplate were set in a public mausoleum. Despite the general poverty, death remained an unusual turn of events, and the murder of a young man would always be a horrible, memorable crime. What could have been a thousand years of life had been erased with two bullets. Today, a murderer was still going unpunished. And every day, without fail, somebody in those buildings—someone who had actually known my father—would think of him, recalling his smile and laugh, and his happy manner, and his preposterous hopes for the future.

I spent a few moments examining the urn, and then I told my bodyguards what I wished to do next.

They refused. Pointblank, they told me they were hired to bring me here and out again. Nobody had whispered a word about actually going inside one of these slum towers. I offered to triple their salaries, and their response was to threaten my driver. Then the three of them piled back into the low sedan, driving away with an unashamed cowardice.

Courage is a nearly impossible trick when you can see Forever.

I entered the building across the street, taking the elevator as high as possible. After that, I had to climb the narrow stairs, passing between armed men who kept asking about my business, and did I know I looked like an old movie star? Finally, on the topmost floor, my way was blocked. Two women—sisters, apparently—took me into a lavatory and made me strip and relieve myself and then dress again. I was asked and asked again, "What's your business here?" But I offered only hints and vague mutterings. I forced them to summon up the curiosity to invite me into what looked like a small and rather ugly penthouse apartment. Every window was bulletproof. Elaborate sensors watched me as I crossed the main room. But the man sitting at his desk was nothing if not relaxed. With a smile, he said, "I've always liked your movies. The old ones best, I suppose." He had a thick, chewy accent, Germanic and French in equal measures. "Sit, if you want. A drink, maybe?"

"Nothing. Thank you."

In his smile, I saw my father. But then again, I had been seeing portions of my father in every face inside that little neighborhood.

"If I may ask: What can I do for you, Miss Cross?"

I opened my notebook, unencrypted a certain file, and began to explain. A friend of mine had passed through these streets some years ago. With blood samples and algorithms, he had easily established what I'd always suspected. "I don't have a sample from you," I told him, "but it seems obvious enough. I have to be your granddaughter."

"You certainly are," he purred.

"And you're also my uncle," I said.

Which brought a little nod and a knowing grin.

"From what I can decipher, my father and I share the same grandfather."

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Of course none of that was a surprise. He knew perfectly well who his father was, and who he was, and whatever reason in the deep past caused him to be disinherited. Ignoring my elaborate diagrams, my grandfather/uncle preferred to study my face and manners. Then with a cold little voice, he asked, "How is my dear father?"

"Alive and well," I reported.

And with a sad sigh, he asked, "Isn't that awful to hear?"

The alarms are inaudible to me. But I hear a sudden flurry of activity, dozens of feet stumbling in the darkness, voices calling out, "Lady, Lady!" Then the search widens, and quiets, and someone checks with the farm's security system, discovering what seems like a critical clue.

Uncle Ethan comes to wake me. But then he hesitates, looking down at Jacob before moving to my bed, and then staring at me until I quietly ask, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"He wants you downstairs. Now."

Ethan leaves me to dress, and I try not to look at Jacob, but at the same time, I can't think about anyone else. Then I slip out into the hall and close the door, and after four long flights of stairs, I find myself looking at my grandfather, a lifetime of acting experience inadequate to this task.

"What?" I blurt, pretending ignorance.

"Lady's gone," he says. "And we saw who did it. We've got a face. You want to see who?"

"All right."

The image has been enhanced and the point-of-view has been shifted, creating a portrait of someone who looks more than a little like my father. For all we know, this is the same person who stole the dog over a hundred years ago. That is Ethan's working assumption. "I've already made calls," he reports. "Our friends with the police are already setting up watchers, waiting for a stealthed multirotor."

"Funny," says Grandfather. For the first time, I can hear the anger at the bottom of his throat. "These people don't have these kinds of resources. Money, and the like. If they went in together, maybe they could steal a machine and pay for its stealthing. But navigating through our security net and out again—that takes more money, and skills you won't find in the slums. Which ignores the very sensible question: Why bother? To piss me off? Is that a good enough reason, Hannah?"

Never a bright man, or imaginative in any meaningful way, Uncle Ethan finds the conversation to be steering wildly off-target. "I don't understand," he complains. "Why are you even talking to her—?"

"Is it a coincidence?" his father interrupts. "She comes home, and the dog's stolen away a second time?"

I stand motionless, my face as bland as I can make it.

"What is it, darling? A trap? Am I supposed to lead my family back into that filth hole a second time . . . and have what happen. . . ? Is there some kind of ambush waiting for me? Is that it?"

Ethan gulps and stares at me.

"No," I report.

"What then?" Grandfather steps closer, knees faltering for a moment

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and then locking tight. With a low, raging voice, he asks, "What is your little scheme, darling?"

"You should know."

He nods.

Ethan asks, "What is it?"

"You want your money for passage on that damned starship, right?"

"In essence, yes."

"Essence?" Grandfather says.

"I want all of this to remain legal," I explain. "I'm not extorting this money from you, and you won't be able to block me with lawyers down the line."

"Really? And why's that?"

"My mother is incompetent to make her own decisions," I begin. "You hold power of attorney over her, for now. But I want you to sign that right over to me, and I'll demand her share of the farm. Since she has been here from the beginning, with her name on the original title . . . her share and mine will be enough to put her and Jacob and myself onboard the Centauri ship."

Grandfather stares at me, that hard face nothing but astonished.

Then with a low, vicious voice, he says, "That's wickedly clever of you, you little bitch."

In my life, this is as close to real praise as I have ever won from the man.

The signatures of participants and witnesses have been duly recorded, and the appropriate money has been transferred into accounts set up for this single purpose. Jacob is awakened and dressed, and my mother is dressed but has fallen asleep again, sitting in a robust little walking chair that leads the way. Jointed legs pull open the front door and climb down the porch stairs. In first light, the air is bitter and dry. A brief overnight snow has left portions of the yard white. But where the multirotor waits, between the house and the blood barn, the snow has been swept away, exposing the frozen black earth beneath.

Nobody stands near the multirotor. Its primary rotors spin slowly, with two of its four motors humming patiently. Before we are close enough to

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feel the wash of the rotors, I tell Mother's chair to stop. Then I take Jacob by the shoulder, telling him, "Wait here."

"But it's cold," he whines.

"No," I warn. "This isn't cold at all."

Several old uncles stand alongside my grandfather. But Ethan stands by himself, down alongside an old pine tree, arms at his side and a stiff, angry expression working its way through his thick face.

To nobody in particular, I ask, "When did the multirotor arrive?"

"Your luggage is already loaded," Grandfather replies.

"The machine," I add. "When did it get here?"

"Twenty minutes ago," Ethan hollers. "I loaded it myself."

I watch him. I stare at his face until Grandfather interrupts, saying, "I'm sorry if you're waiting for a big farewell song. But you can understand. Our mood's pretty ugly, at least for the time being."

"Sure," I say.

I look at him. But of course he won't let me see anything more than an appropriate smoldering. I have worked with some exceptional actors, but in my life, I haven't known anyone as purely talented as Nathaniel Cross.

"Leave," he tells me.

I obey. I walk back to my mother and son, and with a touch, I turn my mother's chair around. Then I kneel and say to Jacob, "Don't ask me why. But we're going to walk now. Through the fields, over those next hills, and down to the rail line. All right?"

But he has to ask, "Why?"

"Then we will wait for the first train north. All right?" As if I didn't hear his question, I tell him again, "Don't ask me why."

We start for the cornfield. When my intentions appear plain, my grandfather laughs. "So what about your luggage? And your mother's things? What should we do with all of that?"

"I'll have it shipped," I promise, barely looking back.

Despite bad knees, the old man manages to close the gap. "You know," he says with what could be construed as a worried tone. "You'll be awfully close to the Kirks' land. And they don't like the Cross clan right now."

I hesitate, if only for an instant.

And I look back at him, letting him see just a useful glimmer of fear.

The chair is the strongest walker among us. When Jacob tires, I move my mother to one side, finding enough room for the two of them to sit pressed together, wrapped up in the same old quilt. Both spend their time nodding in and out of sleep. We climb the first hill, and then the ones that follow. I fill the silence with little stories about being Jacob's age and exploring these fields and the little streams between. I can remember when the deer lived in herds, there were so many of them. I remember flocks of birds, and in the summer, great swarms of flying insects. But the animals are scarce now. Unless they help the crops, they are nothing but burdens. People are everywhere in the world, on land and in the seas, and we are filling in the sky now. "But it's going to be different on the new world," I promise, talking entirely to myself. My companions are both asleep, alternating snores as we cross the last hill, indifferent to the elevated white

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rail below, and beyond, the brown lands around which little legal wars are being waged.

"The Centauri world is pure wilderness," I tell myself, recalling the blue seas and gold lands seen by the deep-space telescopes. "And we won't destroy it with our numbers. Not this time. We'll let our population grow until we're large enough to be stable, and after that, a family won't be able to have a new child until one of them dies, or emigrates." It is an integral part of the colony's charter, and for me, a major drawing card. "We won't crush this new world under our feet," I keep saying, more as a prayer than as a strict belief. I am not a foolish dreamer, despite all my best attempts. I actually hear the doubt in my voice when I say, "This time, we will do things differently—"

And then, I hear another sound.

A sudden, close *crack*.

I almost hesitate. Almost. Then I step out in front of the chair, walking with a purpose, waiting for the next *crack* while looking to my right, catching the faint glimmer of a laser's measured pulse.

The third *crack* feels closer.

But the fourth and fifth are barely audible. Plainly, the AI marksman has found its range. I feel confident enough to leave the others, walking sideways on the hillside, gradually dropping down toward a single enormous oak—the sole survivor of a one-time forest, spared from the chainsaw by my grandfather's love for things ancient and durable.

A figure sits under the tree, dressed in camouflage, with a helmet and a padded vest around his heart and lungs. Once more, he tries to shoot me. I can see one eye expertly sighting along the barrel, and the minimal tug of the finger against a sensitive trigger, and then comes a bullet that moves at what is really an insignificant speed.

The bullet has barely left the barrel when it explodes into a metallic vapor. Compared to the orbital velocities of comets and lost bolts, the speed of a ballistic weapon is nothing. Protecting me is far, far easier than keeping an orbital habitat secure.

Uncle Ethan throws down his gun in frustration.

I am close enough to hear his breathing, to see his wild panic.

But when I search deeper, I find something else. He sobs. He moans. With both hands, he peels away the armor around his heaving chest. If anything, he looks grateful—a sudden and irresistible gratefulness born from discovering some incalculable burden lifted from very old and astonishingly weary shoulders.

I am a woman of my word: Lady is returned to the farm unhurt.

She doesn't know half the people she meets. But still, she runs around like a maniac, and the little children chase her. Jacob chases her. Why not? I watch the idyllic scene even while my grandfather is fitted with an assortment of soft, irresistible restraints.

"I didn't hurt anybody," the old man calls out.

Then louder, he says, "Ethan's the killer. I've suspected it for years. I think he gets sick in the head, and he has to shoot somebody. . . !"

"Why?"

The one-word question is asked, floating in the brightly lit air of the

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blood barn. And when it evaporates, I offer it again. "Why?" I say, turning toward my grandfather. "My father was killed . . . why?"

"Ask Ethan," a rumbling voice told me.

"They're asking him that question now, I'd think. I hope." I show a cold smile. "My uncle isn't smart, but he's not so stupid that he'll sacrifice himself for you. The authorities have him trying to kill three people today. They are going to offer him a deal. Ethan and the rest of the uncles will get the same deal. If they talk honestly about their participation in the old crimes, and if they confess who gave their marching orders, their lives will be spared. Thousand-year sentences will seem like a blessing. And because they are your children, we both know . . . they will do anything possible to save their ugly selves."

The gray eye brightens, but the rest of the face is dull and half-dead.

Again, I ask, "Why did my father have to die?"

Then I answer myself, offering, "Because when you went to the city, you discovered that my father had lied. He really belonged to a family that you hated, and his own father was one of your disinherited children."

Both eyes close, and open again.

"Hardly," he says.

Then with a sluggish smile, he says, "I knew who your father was. The first time I looked at him, I knew what he had to be. But that didn't matter. And do you know why, Hannah? Because sometimes in animal husbandry, in the quest for better breeds, it pays to occasionally cross an excellent bloodline with itself."

I tremble, and wait.

"Your father's loyalty was the question. But that was always a worrisome point. So why did Ethan shoot him on that particular day?" Grandfather conjures up a deep, hateful laugh. "Because by then Ethan had learned how to maintain the tractors and such. Your father had no purpose anymore. And the timing, what with the abduction of Lady, made it all seem quite perfect."

I watch Lady stop long enough to sniff at the heels of my devoted geneticist. He stands with my mother, in the bright chill sunshine, patiently enduring one of her endless, pointless tales.

Quietly, I say, "The court will find you guilty. You will be stripped of your property and your wealth. Your blood cattle, and your dog. And there will be a gallows built specifically for your gruesome old neck."

His laugh sputters.

"But then a pardon agreement will be offered," I continue. "Because you are valuable to an array of experts, the court will offer to spare your life. And since you can't think of being any way but alive, you will agree to the terms. A death sentence will be made eternal. In these next centuries, you will be carted from lab to lab. You'll help geneticists and psychologists and historians. You will let them cut and prod, and as new methods become available, they will analyze your body and mind. They'll coax ancient memories out of you. They'll write great books about you. Of course you'll be poor as a pauper, but a kind of fame is going to find you. Finally. From your little cell, you won't see it, of course. But you will be a famous bastard known on many worlds. And then after another few thousand

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years, that fame has to die away, and the experts will vanish, and you won't remember anything about your life except the walls of your cell and the same few meals that come through the slot near the floor."

I look at a face absolutely drained of its blood.

Quietly, he says, "So that's what this is. Revenge."

"Revenge?" I ask.

"For your father getting killed." He snorts and yanks against his restraints, and asks, "How many decades have you been planning this, Hannah?"

I watch Jacob playing tag with Lady.

Again, with an easy scorn, I say, "Revenge?"

I won't even look at my grandfather anymore. All I see is my son, and I'm thinking to myself that maybe Jacob needs a good smart and loyal dog at his side. And while I'm thinking that, I am saying with a surprisingly calm voice, "No, that isn't why I went to all this trouble. No."

Where would I find a good leash? I'm wondering.

"Then why?" an old voice creaks.

With the clarity of the honest, I confess, "I was afraid. My son and I would move to a new world, and then a few hundred years later, when the colony is seemingly secure, you would arrive. My family would follow me there, chasing the empty lands. . . .

"That's what made me go to so much trouble, Grandfather. . . .

"Not what's past . . . but the crimes sure to come. . . ." ○

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PULP COVER

Gene Wolfe

Gene Wolfe is the winner of the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement, as well as two Nebula Awards, two World Fantasy Awards, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the Prix Apollo. His latest novel, *The Knight,* has just been released by Tor. It is the first book in a two-volume epic fantasy called The Wizard Knight that will be concluded next year with *The Wizard*. Mr. Wolfe also has two upcoming short story collections—this year's *Innocents Aboard* and spring 2005's *Starwater Strains*.

My name does not matter. You have the name of the man I have gotten to tell my story. That's all you need to know. I'm an American, and I live in a town big enough to call itself a city.

I worked for Mr. Arthur H. East, as I'm going to call him. Furniture was our business—Mr. East owned three stores, two in our town and one in a neighboring town. We carried good quality and sold it at reasonable prices. Mr. East was sufficiently well off to have a big house in town and a vacation cottage on a good fishing lake. He hired me as a sales clerk, but promoted me to manager after six years. The promotion included an invitation to dinner, which I of course accepted. Up until that time, I knew no more of Mr. East's family than that he had a plump and pretty daughter I will call Mariel. I knew that only because she had come into the store I called mine looking for her father, and smiled at me.

I fell in love with Mariel at dinner that night. And she with me? I'd like to think so, but I don't know. Since this is my story, let's assume what I want so much to be true: she fell in love with me, but was too young to know it.

She was only fifteen—ten years younger than I was. That was one of the things I learned that night. Others were that she had no brothers or sisters, and that her mother had been dead about eight years.

"You're wondering," Mr. East said, "whether I plan to remarry. I won't until my daughter marries. After that I might."

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I tried to say something noncommittal.

"I was raised by a stepmother," he told me. "I will not let that happen to my daughter."

"It will be quite a while," I said, "before Mariel finishes college."

I assumed, of course, that the daughter of a such a wealthy man would go to college.

Mr. East leveled his finger at me. "You didn't finish college yourself."

I'd had to drop out at the end of my freshman year, when my parents could no longer afford it. I had been taking night classes ever since, switching my major from pre-law to business administration; it is a slow process.

"Finishing college has nothing to do with getting married," Mr. East declared. "Not for Mariel, and, as far as I can see, not for anybody. There are plenty of married students, and plenty of successful people who never graduated."

By that time I realized, as you will have faster than I did, that I was under consideration. I got home that night without so much as bending a fender, although I haven't the least idea how I did it or what route I followed. I would marry lovely Mariel. We might or might not inherit her father's stores—it did not matter. Lovely Mariel would marry me. If her father left them to a second wife, she'd need somebody to run them, and I would be that somebody. Lovely Mariel and I would soon be married.

If her father left them to us, we would be rich. If he did not, it would hardly matter. I'd have a good, secure job, doing work I liked and running a business I understood.

And I would have Mariel.

My whole life opened out before me, and it was a life of love and success. I was walking on air. A few days later a note from Mariel was in my mail. You will sneer when I say that my hands shook as I opened it, but that is sober fact. They did.

She told me she had found out my address without asking her father, who wouldn't have wanted her to write. She said she thought I might want to write to her, and gave me the address of a friend at school. If I would write to the friend enclosing an envelope with "Mariel" on it, the friend would pass it to her in study hall.

I wrote, of course. I must have torn up a dozen letters before I finally wrote the one I sent. I told her how beautiful she was and (I will never forget this) I said that any man on earth would be attracted to her. I said that she could count on me to be a loyal friend and a protector whenever she needed one, and that I would never do anything to hurt her.

After I had sealed the envelope, I wrote a note to her friend, thanking her for what she was doing for us and asking her to write whenever she had news of Mariel.

Here I'm going to try to put three or four years into a couple of minutes. We wrote back and forth like that, generally two or three times a week. As often as she could, Mariel came by the store to see me, trying to time things so that she could stay until closing. I would drive her home, and she would tell Mr. East that she had been shopping at the mall and I had given her a ride home. That was all true. We held hands, and sometimes we kissed. She was more beautiful every time I saw her.

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She dated various boys at school. I knew none of them meant much to her because they changed every few weeks. I knew that I meant a lot to her because she told me all her deepest feelings in her letters. Her father was dating a woman from the town where our third store was. Sometimes he brought her home, and she stayed the night. Mariel didn't think she was good enough for her father, and wrote a lot about her. Mariel herself wanted to get married right away—or didn't want to get married until she was thirty. (I think "thirty" was forever to her, although I was near that age.)

She wanted children. She wanted to be an actress who was a famous singer and dancer, and she wanted to be an astronomer and spend her whole life looking up at the stars—or else go to South America and study monkeys. All that stuff changed and changed, and pretty soon I saw that what she really wanted was pretty simple. She wanted security. She wanted people who would love her and take care of her, people who would love her always, no matter what happened. After that I knew what I had to bear down on, and I did. I told her over and over that what I wanted was a good marriage and children, and that I would always be faithful and loving. Even if my wife did things I did not like, I would always love her and be faithful to her, I said, and I meant every word of it.

It was early in May. I know that because my mother bought pansies and violas in early May every year, and I was digging a new bed for them when my father came to tell me my boss was on the phone.

Mr. East asked me to meet him at Wheeler's for dinner, and I could tell from the way he said it that he had a lot on his mind. When we had eaten dinner together before it had always been at his house. He had a housekeeper, and she would make a company dinner for Mr. East, Mariel, and me. So this was different, and it was pretty obvious why: he wanted to talk to me without Mariel around or her even knowing that we were talking. I was scared.

He was already in a booth with a drink and a cigarette when I got to Wheeler's. We ordered steaks, and after the waiter had gone, Mr. East said, "This isn't about business, and I like to keep my office business-like. Besides, there are always phone calls. Here we won't be interrupted."

I suppose I nodded.

"You know my daughter Mariel. You've given her a lift a couple of times. Do you like her?"

"Yes," I said. "Very much. She's a wonderful girl."

"She' s still just a kid."

I waited for him to go on.

"She'll do whatever I tell her to. I might have to jaw at her a little first, but she'll do it. It's a heavy responsibility."

I said that I realized that, and realized he would have to carry it until Mariel was twenty-one.

"Or until she gets married," he said.

You can guess how I felt when he said that.

"Oscar Pendelton was my roommate in college. We were close then, though we haven't kept in touch the way we ought to. He's been very successful—a lot more successful than I have. I founded a company and ran

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it. He's founded half a dozen and sold them out. He has millions. You remember that big piece *Furniture Trade* did on us?"

I certainly did, it had been a cover story with a lot of color photographs.

"Oscar saw that and showed it to Jack. Jack's his oldest, and the only son he's got. I think there are a couple of girls, too."

I suppose I nodded.

"Oscar sees a lot of business magazines because he's been into and out of a lot of businesses. Naturally he was interested in a story about his old roommate's success. There were two pictures of Mariel in there, remember? One of us outside the house, and another in my study talking to her. Jack got very, very interested in Mariel as soon as he saw her. One of those crazy things, you know? Like falling for a girl you saw on TV."

That was when the waiter came with our steaks, and I'll tell you I was damned glad of it.

"So Oscar wrote to me. Would it be okay if Jack came for a visit? He would stay at our house and take Mariel to shows and so on. I suppose he'll play tennis with her too. I'd be there, and if things looked like they might go too far, I could break it up."

I nodded and pretended I was busy eating.

"Jack's a Yale man. He'll graduate this year. Mariel will graduate from high school, too. I doubt that you knew that, but it's true. She's been looking at colleges. Just fooling around with it, really. You know how kids are."

"Sure."

"So four years difference in their ages. That's not a lot, and she's mature for her age. When Jack' s forty, she' ll be thirty-six."

I said a difference that small hardly mattered.

"Right. Just what I've been thinking myself. Now listen, I want a favor and a big one. Jack's plane lands at nine twenty. United Airlines. I'd like you to meet him at the airport. You can drive out as soon as we finish here. Jack Pendelton. I want you to size him up for me, and I want you to meet me for lunch at noon tomorrow. Tell me what you think of him. Tell me everything the two of you said, and exactly how he seemed to you. I'll have formed my own impressions by that time, but I want to check them against those of a man I can trust who's closer to his own age. Can I count on you?"

Out at the airport, I didn't have to ask which passenger was Jack Pendelton. He was six-foot-two and something about him made you think he was even bigger. He was plenty handsome enough for the movies, and he had on a Yale sweater. We shook hands. I explained that I worked for Mr. East; I said an important business matter had come up, and he was too busy to come in person, but he would probably be home by the time we got there. Jack nodded. He didn't smile. I don't think I ever saw him smile, except at Mariel; and I couldn't get a dozen words out of him the whole time.

Here it is going to sound like I want to make myself out to be a lot smarter than I am. Riding back into town and then out to Mr. East's it seemed to me that there was only one person in the car: me. And there was something else in there with me that wasn't really an animal or a

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machine or even a plant or a rock—something else that wasn't any of those things. We went into Mr. East's and the two of them shook hands, and he introduced Jack to Mariel. I could see that Mariel was attracted to him and scared of him, both at once. I wasn't attracted and I wasn't scared, either, but I had the feeling I'd be scared half to death if I knew more.

Next day Mr. East and I had lunch at a little French place he liked. He asked what I thought of Jack, and I said he was big and strong and tough, from what I'd seen of him, and as hard as nails. But he wasn't human.

"I know what you mean. Oscar says his IQ is in the stratosphere."

"Maybe," I said, "and maybe not . But what I mean is there's nothing warm there. Suppose I had stopped the car, and we got out and fought." (I said that because I had been thinking of it during the drive.) "He could have killed me and thrown my body in the trunk and never turned a hair."

I pointed to my salad. "That stuff is alive. That's why it's nice and fresh and green. When I chew it up and swallow it, I'm killing it. Killing me would bother Jack about as much as killing this stuff bothers me."

"I think he's a fine young man," Mr. East told me, and after that he changed the subject.

I had hoped that Mariel could go to a college in the town where Ellie Smithers lived. Ellie was the woman Mr. East was dating. So did Mariel, and she had said so in her letters. She went to a famous girls' college in upstate New York instead. I won't tell what it was, but if I said the name you'd recognize it. You could have gotten the best car at Bailey's Cadillac & Oldsmobile for what it cost to go there for just one year.

I think it was around Christmas when Mr. East told me about the double wedding. It would be in June, and I was invited. The couples would be Jack Pendelton and Mariel, and Mr. East and Ellie Smithers. It would be a garden wedding "with five hundred guests, if Ellie has her way," and Jack's father, mother, and sisters would fly out.

Mr. East cleared his throat and leaned back. "I'm telling you this in confidence. I want that understood. Oscar's settling a portfolio of investments—stocks and bonds—on Mariel. I'll manage it for her until she's of age. I've checked out those investments, checked them very thoroughly, then had my broker check them over again for me. Two million, three hundred thousand and change if you sold everything today. The income should be around two hundred thousand a year. It could be more. Growth 12 percent or so. Mariel will always be taken care of."

I came to the wedding, but Oscar Pendelton, his wife, and his daughters didn't. Later I found out that Mr. East had gotten a phone call. The woman who called said she was Sara Pendelton, and he had no reason to doubt her. Oscar'd had a heart attack. He was in intensive care. She knew the wedding was all set, and couldn't be postponed. But only Jack would be there.

After it was all over, and Jack and Mariel had flown to Boston to see Jack's father in the hospital, supposedly, I did something I felt a little guilty about at the time. I phoned every last hotel and motel in the area. Nobody'd had reservations for an Oscar Pendelton and family. Nobody'd

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had reservations for a Sara Pendelton, either. Mr. East and Ellie were honeymooning then, so I went out to the house and talked to the housekeeper. She didn't know where the Pendeltons were going to stay, but she hadn't been told to expect five house guests and there was no way in hell she wouldn't have been.

"It wouldn't be regular, anyway, would it? The groom in the house the day before the wedding? Him and his folks would put up at the Hyatt or something, I'm pretty sure." So I checked with the Hyatt again, this time in person. Nothing. It wasn't "I don't know"; it was "absolutely not."

By that time I was so worried I couldn't eat. And I was fighting mad. It took a hell of a lot of doing, but I got Oscar Pendelton on the phone, long distance. Certainly he remembered his old friend Art East. How was Art doing? Jack? No, he didn't have a son with that name. Two sons, Donald and Douglas. Don and Doug, their friends said. Nobody ever called either one of them Jack. He had no daughters. His wife's name was Betty.

You're going to say that I should have told Mr. East before he got back from his honeymoon. I've told myself that about a thousand times. Only I kept thinking it might be some kind of silly mistake. By that time the honeymoon was nearly over; I told myself I would tell him when he got back.

But I didn't. The thing was that I had called his broker. I told him Mr. East had put me in charge of his financial affairs while he was gone, and I wanted to make sure Mariel's trust fund was in order. It was. The brokerage was holding everything, but they would not sell or buy, or make any other changes, without a signed authorization from Mr. East. I explained that I didn't want to change anything, I just wanted to make sure everything was straight. It was. They'd had the whole trust portfolio in their hands two weeks before the ceremony. There was nothing to worry about.

After I hung up the phone I felt like I ought to laugh, but I didn't. On the one hand I was damned sure something was terribly, terribly wrong. On the other it was a couple of million. Suppose the man I'd talked to hadn't been Oscar Pendelton at all. Suppose it had been some joker, and he had been stringing me?

A few days later Mr. East got back all happy and tanned, and I asked as casually as I could where Mariel had gone on her honeymoon, and whether he had heard from her. They were going to tour Europe, he said, for a month. (He had taken two weeks, not wanting to be away from the business any longer than that.) He hadn't heard from her, but then he hadn't expected to.

I said I was worried, and he told me to forget it.

You can probably guess what I did next. I got hold of the girlfriend who had passed my letters to Mariel. She had heard nothing. She had been a bridesmaid, and she gave me the names of the other bridesmaids, and told me where they lived. None of them had heard from Mariel. I talked to every one of them in person, and if they had been lying I would have known it. They weren't. None of them had heard a word from the girl who had liked writing letters enough to write me two and three times a week.

I went to Mr. East and gave it to him straight. I said I was sure some-

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thing had happened to Mariel, and he had damned well better get in touch with his friend Oscar and find out where Jack was. He got in touch with Oscar Pendelton all right, and you know what he found out: no Jack, no heart attack, no plans that had been canceled, no anything.

He hired a detective agency. All they were able to tell him was that there was no such person as Jack Pendelton. Yale had never heard of him. Neither had Social Security. And a lot more of that. They told Mr. East he'd better go to the police and have them list Mariel as a missing person. By that time Jack and Mariel should have been back from Europe for a couple of months, so Mr. East did. Nothing came of that either.

Years passed.

Oscar Pendelton had never had a heart attack, but Mr. East did. It was bad.

He'd had enough time in the hospital to write a will; and when his lawyer read it the audience was the housekeeper, Ellie, and me. The housekeeper got ten thousand. Ellie got the house, the cabin, the cars, and the rest of his money, and she was to administer Mariel's trust fund. If Mariel could not be found, the trust fund went to charity.

Mariel got the business, which I was to run in trust for her, with a nice raise. If Mariel could not be found, the business was to be sold and the money given to charity.

All nice and neat.

My folks died, and I sold the house and moved into an apartment.

Seven years after her wedding, Mariel was declared legally dead. And that was that.

I had an MBA. A night-school MBA, but still an MBA. I knew the furniture business backward and forward, and I had a lot of contacts in that business; I moved to a bigger town when a company there offered me a good job. I was thirty-six, going bald but not too bad looking. All right, I wasn't Jack. But Jack hadn't been Jack either. I dated maybe half a dozen girls, but the more I saw of them the less I liked them.

One night my bell rang. I pushed the button to let my visitor in and went to the door to see who it was.

It was Mariel.

She was only twenty-five, but she looked like hell. Her cheeks had fallen in and you could see the fear in her eyes. (You still can.) I told her to come in and sit down, and said I was damned glad to see her—which I was—and I had wine and beer and cola, and could make coffee or tea if she'd like that. What did she want?

And she said, "Everything."

Just like that.

She had no money and no place to stay. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten, but she couldn't chew anything much because her back teeth were gone. She needed a bath and clean clothes.

I asked her how she'd found me, and I expected her to say Ellie'd told her, or at least somebody in the town where we were born. She didn't. She had been wandering from city to city for months, hitch-hiking, begging, doing time in jail for shoplifting canned soup from a supermarket. She couldn't remember the town we had lived in or where it was. All she could

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remember was three names: Mary East, Arthur East, and my name. Mary East had been her mother. She had repeated those names a hundred times to people she met, and finally someone had pointed out my building, and of course my name had been on the plate beside the bell button. As if all that wasn't bad enough, she kept switching to a foreign language, and I'd have to stop her and get her to speak English again. I can recognize quite a few languages when I hear them, and it wasn't remotely like Spanish or German or even Chinese or Arabic, and it certainly wasn't Polish or Russian.

I got milk and soup into her, and crackers she soaked in her soup so she could eat them. She handed her clothes to me out the bathroom door, and I put them in the little washing machine off my kitchen. When she came out, all wrapped up in one of my robes, she asked me who I was, saying she had remembered my name and knew my face, but didn't know how she had known me. I said I was the guy who wanted to be her husband, and she screamed.

We're married now, Mariel and me; so I got what I had wanted so badly years ago. Eleven months after we were married, she had Een. She said he had to be named Een, and got hysterical when I argued; so I guess it's a name from the place where she was. She won't tell me where that is, and says she doesn't know. She let me pick Een's middle name, so his name is Een Richard and my name, and most people think it's Ian Richard. Lauri and Lois came after that, and I know they're mine.

Okay, you're going to say it's not possible, that human women carry children for nine months and that's that. But when I look into Een's eyes, I know.

He's a good kid. Don't get me wrong. He's bright, and when you tell him to clean up his room he does it. He doesn't play with other kids, but they respect him. Or else. In two more years, he's going to be one hell of a high-school football player.

That's almost all I have to say. One night I woke up, and Mariel wasn't in the bed. I happened to look out the back window, and she was out there with Een pointing out stars and stuff.

So I thought I ought to warn people, and now I have. While I was telling all this, the man who's going to write it showed me one of his old pulp magazines. It has a monster with great big eyes and tentacles on it, and this monster is chasing a girl in a one-piece tin swimsuit. But it's not really like that. It isn't really like that at all. O

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WHAT SHE LEFT BEHIND

Sarah A. Hoyt

Sarah A. Hoyt was born and raised just outside of Porto, Portugal. She now lives in Colorado with her husband, two kids, and four cats. Ms. Hoyt is the author of *Ill Met By Moonlight, All Night Awake,* and *Any Man So Daring,* a magical reconstruction of Shakespeare's life, published by Ace. She's currently at work on another novel. "What She Left Behind" is her first story for *Asimov's.*

Pedro was twelve the first time he saw his mother.

It was a frosty winter night, and he lay in bed, turned away from the door to his bedroom and toward the window that looked out over the garden.

His room was dark, the oil lamp on the bedside blown out. On the other side of the bed, his father was putting his pants on, composing himself.

And Pedro was trying to forget that his father was there, trying to forget what had happened. It happened every night, and, every night, he forgot about it, by making himself Pedro and the other.

Pedro was his mind and his thoughts, and the inside of his mind, where he lived in any way he wished. The other was the body on the narrow bed, between the too-stiff linen sheets, in the smell of freshly sawn wood that his father brought home from his carpentry workshop, and the smell of semen thick in the air.

That night, the game wasn't working. Pedro and the other remained stubbornly the same, stubbornly aware of violation and intrusion.

He turned toward his window and listened to the wind whistle outside, and looked at the jeweled frost patterns, and told himself that his father wasn't there. Not at all. Not there.

And then he saw her.

She looked like an angel, he thought. And then, on the heels of that, that she looked like his own face, the face glimpsed in the mirror, but magically transformed to a female face of ethereal beauty.

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She had the same oval face, the same broad grey eyes, the same gently arched eyebrows. But the dark blonde hair that streamed around her face was curly and wild, and on her head—incongruous in the winter frost and the snow—rested a crown of tiny pink roses, woven together, twisted, holding her hair back.

She tapped on the window with tapered fingers and dragged them on the frost patterns, putting long, clean streaks through the white.

Had he fallen asleep? Was he dreaming?

His window, on the second floor of the house, could not be reached from any adjacent wall. There were no tall trees nearby.

And yet, her face was at his window, and her small, rosebud mouth formed words, words he couldn't understand—as if she spoke another language.

Behind him, he felt his father stand up—the mattress bouncing back from the weight.

Normally, this was the moment of relief, the moment when he was left alone in his bed. Alone with his thoughts and his dreams. Alone, to be Pedro once more.

But today, his heart beat faster, and his hand clutched the sheet tight, and his eyes clenched shut for just a moment.

If his father turned. If his father *looked*. . . .

He didn't know what or why, but he knew, in his rushing heart, his clenching muscles, that something awful would happen. Something . . .

His father shuffled to the door. The door opened and closed, softly, carefully, so as not to wake the housekeeper and maid on the floor below.

And Pedro was out of the bed and hurrying to the window, and Pedro was hungry and desperate, wanting to see the woman, wanting to *know,* wanting to draw her close, to ask who she was and how she had the freedom to come and go through the air and look through second-floor windows.

But when he threw open the window, and the freezing air blew into his room, there was no one there.

He'd seen the woman, clear as day, and her fingermarks still remained on the frosty glass of the window.

But outside, the fields that separated Pedro's house from the river were empty and silent, covered in a mantle of frost, like a brittle shell over the dried grass of autumn.

The river itself murmured in the distance, too deep and fast-running to be silenced by any winter frost.

And the trees on its banks were stripped of leaves, desolate, lifting their arms to the heavens like despairing penitents.

Pedro's eyes searched the trees and the thorny wild blackberry bushes beneath them, the unbroken layer of ice upon the fields, and the river below.

If he'd not dreamed. . . . If he'd not dreamed . . .

His heart beat in his chest, hammering, and even the cold of the winter air could not cool the heat of his nerves, his need to know who that woman was and how she could come to him like that, through the air.

What had she seen? What did she know? How could he forget what

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happened every night if anyone knew? And why couldn't *he* fly away? Why couldn't *he?*

Impatient, irritated, he started to close the window.

A tinkle of metal, a shine of something in the dark room, and he looked down to see a small ring fall at his feet.

It was gold and plain—a flat metal band, suitable for a woman's finger. Or a boy's.

On the top side, the engraving of a rose, done in exquisite detail, recalled the crown on the woman's head.

And inside, there were two names, miniature, and yet flowing and curly as though done by an unhurried hand with a weightless pen: Rosa Silva.

His mother.

He opened the window again. He leaned out of it and almost called, "Mother!"

But that would only bring his father into the room, screaming and yelling and hitting.

Pedro had made that mistake once. He was three, and he'd asked his father why he didn't have a mother—why he didn't have a mother like other boys did.

He remembered the expression in his father's eyes—a mix of blinding rage and pain. And he remembered his father's fists. . . .

The housekeeper had pulled his father away.

Later, dabbing a cool towel against Pedro's cheek, the housekeeper, a plump, motherly woman with a soft voice, had whispered that Pedro must not mention his mother. Ever.

"She left the day of your birth," the housekeeper had said, and Pedro could remember her whisper so well it might have been whispering in his ear now. "She left the day of your birth, and you should never mention her. It hurts your father."

Now, nearly ten years later, hurting his father was the least of Pedro's worries. But he didn't want his father to come into the room. He didn't want his father to know.

He looked at the empty, desolate garden, and he formed his mother's name with his lips.

If his mother could fly through the air, why hadn't she taken *him?*

The second time Pedro saw his mother, he was fifteen, and he was walking back home from the school, from seeing the results of his ninth grade exam.

It was a June afternoon, at the beginning of the summer vacation. Where he lived, in a village on the outskirts of Porto, Portugal, this meant green wheat planted in broad fields, birds singing in thickets of pine and blackberry, and gnarled oaks covered in leaves, providing shade for reading and dreaming.

He walked home through the fields, his hands raking the green wheat stalks and tearing off unripe grains as he passed.

His grades had been better than he'd expected. Better than anyone could have anticipated. That wild poetry that often ran through his mind uninvited, carving wide channels in his emotions, had proven a tool for

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understanding the poetry of others. The speech that flowed easily through his tongue and his pen had convinced someone that he should be studying literature.

The village schoolmaster, a poor man with only his salary to live on, was prepared to stake his retirement money to send Pedro to college.

But the money wasn't needed. The money was immaterial. Pedro's father was a specialized carpenter—expert at carving saints whose ecstatic expressions and flowing limbs attracted business from far and wide. His saints were displayed in churches as far away as Brazil, across the Atlantic.

Money was no object, if Pedro's father could be convinced to let his son go to college.

Pedro walked through the fields, rehearsing in his mind how to explain to his father. "Father, they say I'm smart."

"Father, I can do it."

"Father, I could be a doctor of philosophy."

"Father—"

The words died on his lips.

Standing in front of him was the same woman he'd glimpsed, that frosty night so many years ago—flowing hair and oval face and wide, startled-looking grey eyes.

Her hair flowed on the afternoon breeze, as did her clothes—odd vestments, white and so diaphanous and sparkling that they looked as though they'd been spun from fog and woven from fireflies.

He clutched her ring upon his finger, the ring she'd given him three years ago. He felt it cold and solid.

He put out his hand and her hand—soft velvet and cold, tapered fingers—met it.

Afraid to speak, he heard her say, "Pedro. Pedrito."

He blinked and stared, his voice for once stilled.

"Pedro," she said. "I didn't want to leave you. But you were just a baby, and I couldn't—*I couldn't*—you were theirs, of their blood. I couldn't bring you with me. But now you can come with me. You can come now."

Still he stood mute, dumbfounded. He could feel that his mouth was open, sagging in an expression of utter amazement.

She took her hand away from his and smiled, hesitantly. "Your father met me by the river, and I gave him my troth to live with him and bear his children until he should strike me three times. And then I was free to go. But I couldn't take you until you were old enough to choose. Now you are free to come with me." She waved her hand over the wheat. "I'm a king's daughter. You are a prince of the air kingdoms."

But he stepped away, he backed away from her amid the tall, rustling wheat stalks.

A prince was he? And she a king's daughter? A king's daughter of some magical kingdom?

It wasn't the magic he had trouble believing. The land he lived in was an old land, inhabited by Celts and Carthaginians, invaded by Romans and Germanic tribes and Arabs, and then Germanic tribes again. Each people had inhabited the land, called it their own. Their dead had turned

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to dust in these fertile fields, poured their blood out in great battles on the rushing river sides. Their bones made up the wheat stalks, the soft loam under foot, the rugose trunks of shade-giving trees.

Their ghosts and their dreams walked the landscape, their gods and their demons followed the living and whispered in their ears.

Anything was possible.

But if Pedro's mother truly *were* such—a free spirit of the air, a princess, a being of light and fog, why had she left her baby behind? She had told Pedro no more than what he knew. She had left him. She'd not given him any convincing reason, any believable explanation.

And he felt his gorge rise at the sight of her smooth skin, her oval face, her blonde hair streaming in the summer wind.

The heat of the sun prickled at his back, calling a river of sweat from beneath his shirt, and he felt hot, he felt mad, he felt repelled by her diaphanous beauty.

She'd known what his father was. She'd known what would happen. He was as sure of it as he hoped one day to be sure of salvation.

She'd left him behind as a sacrificial victim. In her place.

He turned his back on her and ran through the fields, a wordless scream escaping his lips to echo over the silent fields, through the too-still afternoon.

Half an hour later, when he got home, he was sweaty and exhausted and gasping. His legs hurt, his arms felt as though they would drop off, and he felt numb from tiredness and anger.

And when his father told him, "I don't need a doctor of philosophy in the family. You shall learn my trade," it didn't even hurt.

It didn't hurt because he was so angry. So angry that he could have killed them both—his angry, abusive, domineering father, his beautiful, ethereal mother.

Instead, he went out with school friends. He'd never had many friends, growing up. He'd been the strange one, the outside one. Pedro of the poetry and the dreams. Pedro who knew words others didn't know, who could call to his tongue the name of every bird in the field, every fish in the brook.

But he went out with his school fellows, anyway.

They were celebrating their freedom from books and pens and paper. And he was saying goodbye to learning and poetry. They went from tavern to tavern, singing and laughing, calling at unknown women in the street, and drinking. Drinking a lot.

When he got home, sodden drunk, to fall half in, half out of his front door, so insensible that he barely felt the rain of kicks to his side, barely heard his father screaming at him to explain himself, he'd found a kind of peace.

Pedro didn't love Mariana. Oh, she was beautiful enough. Twenty years old, just two years younger than him, she had midnight-black hair and pale, white silk skin.

And perhaps he found in her regular features, her soft fingers, her musical voice, an echo of his long-lost mother's.

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But he didn't love her.

He'd just been happy to be here, in this small village. The village was called Alem, which, in archaic language, meant *beyond,* and it was remote enough, far enough from everything, to be, indeed, beyond.

Pedro liked the remoteness, the distance, that let him be free to invent himself a persona, a new attitude.

He'd taken a contract to restore the village church, and he'd bought brand-new, crisp clothing and he played the city dandy to the locals' credulous gazes.

The church, enormous, set amid a straggle of tiny, rough-stone houses and hard-scrabble fields that were good for oats and cabbage and little else, was the votive payment of some ancient king for some forgotten victory.

Inside it, gilded panels and exquisitely carved, suffering saints, had corroded with time, darkened with humidity, lost shape and splendor.

And the village had saved enough money, over who knew how many years, to hire a master carpenter to restore it.

Pedro had taken the contract, as much to be away from home as to make the money.

And he'd spent months, happily, restoring the lacy wooden carvings that lined the walls of the church, re-gilding the woodwork, giving this saint his nose back and that one the keys to heaven that time and weather had turned to dust in the carved wooden hand.

He'd seen Mariana in the church first—her head bowed and a lacy shawl over her black hair.

And he'd seen her dark blue eyes watching him.

From there, it had been only a step to the enjoyment of her charms out behind the church, where the sun warmed the stone benches and where no one could spy on them, save maybe the ghosts of the graveyard that stretched beyond.

It was because he didn't love her that he loved their time together. It was because he craved only her soft flesh, her yielding body, because they had nothing to talk about, nothing in common, that he could enjoy her.

And that was why it shocked him so much when the man came to the church one afternoon, while Pedro was working on a carving of St. Anthony, with his book and the chubby baby sitting, smiling and round upon it.

"Pedro Silva," the man said.

Pedro looked up. He knew who the man was, though Pedro had never talked to him. He'd have known who he was even if he'd never seen the man before. He had the same dark hair and pale skin as Mariana. But his face was round, his cheeks red. And he stood taller than Pedro, his shoulders broad and massive—the shoulders of a man who worked, sun to sun, in his vast fields. And the fists he clenched, one on either side of his body, were fists the size of shovels—big and broad and immense, each giving the impression of a heavy weight, of blind rage barely contained.

"Yes?" Pedro said, looking up and trying to keep his face impassive. He'd grown up like his mother—slender and small, with his oval face, his too-wide eyes. The women thought him handsome, but men were likely to have different opinions.

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"My daughter loves you," the man said.

Pedro nodded, though he wasn't agreeing. Did Mariana love him? He very much doubted it.

"Do you love her?"

Pedro shrugged. Pedro didn't love anyone. He'd realized some time ago that he wasn't a man—a human being, made of the same things that made up other human beings.

Men loved their mothers and their fathers, their sisters and their brothers. They nurtured tender feelings for their teachers, their neighbors, their friends.

But Pedro was himself, alone. Neither human nor a child of the air, neither loving nor loved. A creature of flesh and blood with a spirit that longed to soar away and vanish.

How could he attach himself to anyone?

His shrug didn't satisfy the man. The man came closer, fists clenched, and his voice, when he spoke, had tightened into a growl. "Do you love my daughter?" he asked again.

Pedro opened his mouth to deny it, but he saw the huge fists quivering with rage, and he'd been struck often enough to know how much it hurt.

If his *father* had struck him hard enough to hurt him that badly, hard enough to crack ribs and break fingers, what wouldn't this stranger do?

"Yes," he said, and swallowed to make his lie more palatable. "Yes."

The man smiled, showing broad teeth. "Good. That's good. She said so. You'll marry her next month, then, as soon as we can run the bans."

Pedro opened his mouth to ask why so soon, why in such a hurry? Her father grinned and spoke softly, "You must, you know. People have seen you together. People have talked. And my Mariana has no dowry. Next to nothing, save her beauty and her reputation. And you've tainted her reputation."

When the man left, Pedro came to himself. What had he done? What had he done?

Had he just agreed to marry a woman he didn't love? Worse—he thought of Mariana's sweet but vacuous eyes, her empty words, her babble, her simple-minded opinions—had he just agreed to marry a woman he *couldn't* love? And a woman without money and without any sense to save money.

Pedro knew his father's own money had long since vanished into taverns and drinking, into extravagances and compensations for the love who'd left him.

If Pedro married Mariana, he'd be consigning himself to a life of poverty, a life of struggling drudgery and squalor.

He picked up his tools, which lay scattered on the wooden floor of the church. Looking up at St. Anthony, the new side of the saint's face a swirl of oak knots, the old side mellow paint showing pale skin and a dark, rolling eye, he thought that St. Anthony was the saint of dumb animals. And dumb animal seemed to be his state now.

He begged St. Anthony's help in escaping, while he carefully nestled his tools in their leather pouch.

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Mariana wasn't for him, or he for Mariana. He'd lost his chance at attending college, his chance at learning. He'd lost his chance at being a prince of the air kingdoms. He'd lost any chance at loving.

He would not, now, give up his remaining freedom—the swirling liberty of taverns and drinking and friends, for the sake of a woman with whom he couldn't even talk.

He decided to forego his clothes, left in his narrow room at the local hostelry. Two pairs of pants and two shirts were little enough to pay for his escape.

He had his tools and his trade. He had money in his pocket. He could get a horse in the next village and cross the country to where no one would ever have heard of him or of his involvement with Mariana.

And, in time, Mariana would forget him and find another victim. Or another lover. Someone better suited to love and marriage than Pedro would ever be.

He shoved his tools in the back pocket of his working pants and set off across the fields.

The third time Pedro saw his mother was on the evening of the second day after his flight from Alem.

He was crossing a field of ripe golden wheat, as the sun sank low in the horizon. He'd stolen some apples as he walked, and he was hungry and tired both.

But he didn't want to stop to buy food. Not until he was much further from Alem.

Doubtless, Mariana's friends and relatives had sent out word. Doubtless, people were out looking for him, ready to force him to go back and shackle himself to a loveless marriage.

Tired and hungry he walked, toward the splendor of the setting sun that put a reddish tint upon the ripe wheat, making it look like bloodied gold.

His mother appeared out of nowhere, forming in the air in front of him: oval face and large eyes and smiling rosebud mouth.

This time, there was a fragrance around her, too: the fragrance of a ripening, opening rose.

"Come with me," she said. "Come with me. There is no reason for you to struggle in this world. You don't belong to them. You are of *us.* A prince of the air, a thing of beauty and light! Come with me."

She touched his hand. He held hers—small and soft and cold, very cold—in his.

And in that moment of grasping her hand, the world shifted around him.

Suddenly, where the wheat field had been, there was a field of roses—low bushes woven together, spreading to the horizon. Low bushes woven together so tightly that they formed a flat pavement upon which he could walk.

And walk he did, beside his beautiful mother.

From everywhere, people materialized, dressed in garments of fog and light. And he himself wore fog and light that floated around him and sparkled as though fireflies had been woven into the fabric.

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And his feet moved effortlessly, and his mind felt like soaring into poetry and song. The aches and pains of a mortal body had left him, and, in leaving him, had made him feel light and cleansed and . . . good.

In the distance, a castle stood. Not a castle of stone and earth, iron and wood, like the ones that dotted the Portuguese countryside, witnesses to past battles and desperate mortal struggles.

No, this was a castle such as exist only in dreams and in the pages of books. It stood against the blue sky, streaming red and gold flags.

In their effortless walk over the rose fields, they were there in no time at all, and, entering through the door, they floated effortlessly along a gold and marble salon to a high throne set atop a flight of marble stairs.

"Oh, so you've come to us at last," the man on the throne said. He looked like Pedro. An aged Pedro, with frosty snow in his hair. "You've come to us, grandson. We've waited long."

The king gestured with a golden scepter and spoke to a mass of courtiers that stood behind his throne. "Put a mantle on his back and a signet on his finger. He's your prince who was lost so long in the land of men."

And Pedro blinked, sure he was sleeping but knowing he was awake, while a cloak was draped over his shoulders, and a light, slim creature—a girl that seemed woven of air—knelt to slip a signet ring on his finger.

Pedro's mother stood on his other side, and held his hand tight and smiled proudly.

"All hail my grandson," the man on the throne said. "Who finally made the right decision, leaving behind the mortal woman and her babe and coming to us, where he belongs."

And in that moment, as the cold signet ring touched his fingertip, feeling icier, colder, than anything Pedro had ever felt, he heard the word "*babe*."

His hand recoiled from the signet ring, and he turned, bewildered, to face the creature on the throne. His grandfather?

And it seemed to him that the whole scene around him wavered—throne and marble castle walls, thronged courtiers, and even his mother herself, standing smiling and proud next to him.

"Babe?" he asked.

The man on the throne either didn't hear or couldn't understand the coldness in Pedro's voice, the fear in Pedro's heart.

"The babe," he said. "Your got upon this woman. You did well to leave it. It was but a third of our kind, with all the rest mortal stuff."

Mortal stuff.

A mingle of mortal and people of the air.

Pedro had impregnated Mariana. He'd set his own seed within her womb and made his likeness within her.

The child would be a creature of air *and* mortal—human and other—in whatever proportion. Just like him.

And it would grow up alone, at the mercy of whoever married Mariana; at the mercy of Mariana's revenge for her lost love, for the failure of her dreams of air and enchantment. Just like him.

Pedro didn't know what love was, or if he could ever love. But he was no longer alone. There was another like himself, growing in a womb in Alem.

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"I must return," he said, and stepped back from the fantastical court. "I must return to Alem."

He pulled his hand away from his mother's, and he saw his mother's face—her mouth opening wide and horrified, as did her eyes too—calling to him as clearly as if she'd spoken.

"Pedro," she said. "Pedro!"

"No," he said. "No. I must go." And he was running, running back over the fields of tightly woven roses, their pink petals becoming harsher and more real as he ran, till he could feel the thorns beneath the petals, tearing at his soles, scratching him.

His mother flew behind him, and her hands clutched at him, but could not hold him.

"Pedro," she wailed. "You are mine. I've waited for you for so long."

For so long had she left him alone, helpless and without protection. Alone. He wouldn't do that to a child of his.

And his mother was in his hair and on his shoulders, her hands touching him and attempting to hold him, yet feeling like no more than a whisper of breeze on his flesh.

"Pedro," she said sadly, regretfully, her voice as faint as the wind.

He woke up in the field of wheat, with the stars shining overhead.

Footsore and hungry, he made his way back to Alem.

Fifty years later, Pedro's house was small and dismal, set in a once fashionable sixteenth-century suburb that had fallen into despair and disrepute.

The road, on either side, was filled with ruined and half-ruined houses, sometimes little more than random piles of rocks. But from those piles, a straggle of children would emerge, begging and pleading. And from those stones the smell of cabbage soup and human waste emerged, so deeply ingrained into the neighborhood that it seemed as solid as the crumbling mortar, the irregular stones that made up the houses themselves.

The house where Pedro lived was different. Small—comprised of a front room, a kitchen, and a bedroom—and relying on an outhouse for plumbing, it nonetheless was kept in good repair. And every spring, the rose bushes he kept in containers and flowerbeds gave the patio the look of an enchanted place.

It was spring now, and the children had come back—all his children, and their children. They had his quick wit and Mariana's beauty, and sometimes Pedro marveled that such misfit beings, such creatures melded of two warring substances, could do as well as his children had in the world.

A doctor, an engineer, and two artists had come from his humble cottage, where they'd grown up sharing a bed in the living room.

Looking at his children's expensive, sprawling houses, sometimes Pedro marveled that they ever came back at all, to visit the place where they'd grown up. That they'd even admit to it.

But here they were, on this spring evening, talking and giggling inside, and telling stories of their childhood that seemed much funnier now than when need had to make do and drove them to extremes for new clothing or better food.

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And Pedro was outside, listening to them and enjoying a feeling he wasn't sure he could name.

Contentment? Acceptance?

Whatever it was, it allowed him to stand in his yard, smelling his outhouse and his roses, and hearing the heavy traffic of cars and buses outside his window, and not feel pain. It allowed him to know he'd never own a car, never fly through the air in an airplane. Never see other lands, never do any of the things that were open to his children and grandchildren in this brave century in which he'd grown but not been born . . . to know it, and not feel pain.

He'd aged well, and the back he leaned against the warm stone wall of his house was straight and unbowed. His large grey eyes, too, still worked well enough for him to discern someone sitting by the pink rose bush.

For a moment, he started, because he thought it was his mother. Same streaming hair, though darker, same oval face, same large eyes. But this girl's eyes were much darker, and she was a child, nine years old. Euridice, his youngest granddaughter.

She had a book on her lap and was looking at him with a puzzled expression.

He enjoyed helping his children and grandchildren with their homework. "Euridice?" he said. "Something you don't understand?"

"Oh, all of it," she said, and lifted her book, showing a cover with a familiar castle and a diaphanously attired princess. "What happens after Cinderella runs away? What happens after the selky wife returns to her people? What happens after the nymph slips back into her tree again?"

For a moment, Pedro didn't understand. He frowned at Euridice, thinking of his mother slipping away into the night.

What had happened?

Fear and pain and revenge for what couldn't be, what couldn't happen, for the enchantment that had never been true.

He shaped his lips to say that mortals remained behind. That mortals remained behind in pain, in hunger, in need.

But then Euridice looked at him, dark eyes serious. "See, that's why I don't like fairytales," this child of the new century said. "Because they're silly. They never tell us what happens *after* the magic is gone."

Pedro put his hand down on her head. Its calloused skin touched silky hair. He looked down at her large, wondering eyes.

And suddenly a bubbling laughter came over him. He'd thought he'd given up his kingdom, his place as prince of the air. He'd thought he'd tied himself needlessly to need and poverty and a life without love.

For many years, struggling from day to day, he'd thought he was a fool not to have run—not to have run and been a prince in the wide kingdoms beyond, rather than staying here with the wife he didn't love, the children for whom he'd had to provide with grinding daily toil.

And instead . . .

"The magic is never gone," he said, and it seemed to him that at the edge of his vision, he saw rose fields extending to a perfect castle, banners snapping in the air. And his body felt light, young and strong. "The magic is *within*," he said. ❍

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SUNDAY AT THE VIRTUAL BEACH

Honeybees with the
facial features of cherubs buzz around
my head, calming me with their
Gregorian chants,

while a Van Gogh
sunset illuminates a flight of sea gulls
reverse-evolving back into our prehistoric past,
here in this place of Sunday quietude,
and built-in security.

If a tsunami were to
rear its watery death head, focusing upon
the very spot where turtle-like I've
burrowed into the sand,

I'd pay it no mind, for in this
virtual world reality doesn't matter, and
to lunch, means tea, served Frisbee style,
by the Mad Hatter.

So tan I will with pixel ease,
well oiled with virtual sun block,
the bikini clad simulacra delighting my eyes,
and muscle bound avatars

going about their
inherent ways of kicking up sand,
rippling their abs, and blocking the virtual
sun like big, muscular clouds of
steroid fueled vanity.

—G.O. Clark

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JAGGANATH

Richard Flood

Richard Flood grew up in the Midwest and has lived on both coasts. He has published fiction in various "little magazines," and more recently, in two volumes of *Writers of the Future.* He studied writing at the University of California, but now pretends to be a technology expert for a major financial institution. "Jagganath" is his first story for *Asimov's.*

A phone chittered somewhere.

Above, the ceiling fan whined.

Gita sat up and looked out at the lush hills in the distance. The air was moist and already warm, and she wondered again why they hadn't put the Institute a little further up the mountainside, where it was cooler.

The phone rang again.

No, she realized, not a phone. A bird, somewhere above her room.

Someone knocked at the door. "Gita?"

"One minute." She slipped on her robe and shooed a small lizard from her sandals, frowning. It wasn't the Delhi Taj, this place. Except in price.

Jigme Dhonden stood in her doorway, holding a tray. Shaven-head, ochre robes, breakfast. Her room-service monk. "G'morning."

She smiled at Jigme's New Jersey accent, the hard-edged English of his beloved DJs on the Pirate Planet global feed. But much better than his Hindi, anyway.

He put the tray on a low table near one wall and eased crosslegged to the floor.

"No headaches?"

"No." She stared at the main course, pallid rice disks covered in brown sauce. "Idlis?"

Jigme shrugged. "Couldn't talk the cook into eggs today."

"I really dislike idlis."

"I know. He is from the South and takes this personally, I think. Anyway—no more disorientation?"

"No."

"What about memory? No blanking?"

"No, I'm fine. Why the exam? I just got up."

"I don't want to send you home yet," Jigme said, plaintively. "Not much I can do about it, I guess."

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"Not much I can do either. As far as the firm's concerned, I'm ready to go back to work."

Jigme, head down, played with a thread on the hem of his robe. She would miss him. They had spent many hours together—therapy sessions, meals, morning walks in the hills. He was not yet twenty, but wiser than most adults, and a kind soul.

He looked up. "They're just paying for band-aids, you know. We should work on your fragmentia more seriously."

"They're paying for a little time off, a little stress-reduction and peace. They're not interested in having me rewired." She ate a little food.

"You're *already* rewired, thanks to a higher education," Jigme said. "But it bothers me that you'll leave here and still have classic signs of info-overload. I feel like I'm not doing my job."

She patted his leg, smiling. "I'm fine, really."

Jigme studied her. "It's not just them, is it? *You* think this is a kind of vacation, too."

"Jigme—" She didn't like where the conversation was headed.

"DIID. Dharamshala Institute for Informational Disorders," Jigme said. "*Not* Dharamshala Mountain Resort!"

"I didn't say it was."

"You've been here three times in the last three years, Gita. That's not good. Your company is satisfied with half-fixes, which serve their needs. But you don't have to play along."

"I'm not the ochre-robe type, Jigme. What would you have me do?"

"I don't know. I just see what's going on, and it bothers me. I *care* about you."

"I'm fine," Gita said. "Life is good. I have a great job in a great city, in the center of the media universe. You worry too much."

Jigme, long-faced, said nothing.

"What?" Gita asked.

"Forget about it."

She suppressed a smile. *Fuhgedaboudit.*

"I'm badgering you," Jigme said. "I don't mean to."

"But what's wrong with what I said? It's true."

"From an air-conditioned office in downtown Mumbai, maybe. In a lot of other places, it's different. Disease, quiet little wars, poisoned habitat. Laos has been a wasteland for a generation now. Our own government's fighting Chinese factions in Sikkim."

"I'm not happy about any of that," she said. "But what can you or I do? Why dwell on things you can't change? There are far too many things to fix."

Jigme smiled wryly. "The first sign of infoload, right? 'Too much to process.'"

"But, again, *true*."

Jigme shrugged. He took a slow breath, looked away. Gita glimpsed thread-like scars trailing down his neck. She had seen them before, but never said anything.

"Where did those come from?"

"Hm?"

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She leaned forward and touched his neck.

"Oh," Jigme said. "From another life. Not important, really."

"Interface scars?" Gita asked.

He pulled down his robes to show a pale blue heart tattooed on his chest. "One of these, too," he said. "Also from long ago."

She stared, puzzled. Netpulse tattoos were a status symbol of sorts for those important enough to have their vital signs monitored. "Long ago? You're *nineteen!*"

"I wasn't *born* a monk. I came here as a patient like you. No one figured I'd sign up for the robes." He eyed her. "But it *does* take time to fix someone up for real. More time than most of us want to believe."

"No more lectures, please?" Gita pushed away her breakfast.

"I don't usually get attached to the patients, you know." Jigme squinted at her. "Of course, you're way better-looking than most of them. With a lot less facial hair."

"Thanks. I'm flattered."

"Seriously, *you* I'd like to save."

"Save," Gita said blankly.

"I mean it."

"From an exciting life in the big city?"

Jigme frowned. "From the dangers of neural excess. Obviously."

"We've already flogged this, Jigme. I have to pack, really."

He nodded, then stood, picked up the breakfast tray. "All right, I give up. But listen, I'm headed out west for a few days, to Gujarat. We have a rehab center in Rajkot. On the way back, I can drop down to Mumbai. How 'bout I stop in?"

Gita smiled. "To give another sermon?"

"*No*—to say hello." He smirked. "Hey, I'll buy you an idli for lunch."

"Not if I can help it!"

As he went out the door, she glimpsed the scars again. She'd start a net search on the way to the airport and look into his "long ago."

In Mumbai, her limo crept through a sea of pedestrians toward Rasa Media's office, the outside world muted behind the smoked glass. Mercifully muted. Outside, the air teemed with non-sequitur silliness. Cartoon animals scampered along building façades, talking food-processors spun through the air. A huge pink blimp rose from the streets, then disintegrated, its voxels reforming into Tamil text that few Mumbai residents could read.

She smiled. "Beware the juggernaut," Jigme liked to say, mutating Lewis Carroll's poem. *The jaws of light, the claws that catch.* In Jigme's view, she was descending into some version of hell.

Gita watched the visuals. Why did anyone spend money on worthless noise? And the glowing nighttime ones were even more obtrusive. She had to opaque her windows, like some poor wartime soul hiding from Pakistani bombers.

Her palmkit chimed in her bag—the search program announcing its first load of Jigme data.

Lots of it, she observed. Business journals five or six years old showed

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Jigme in his early teens. He had invented software that screened the vast flow of data on the net, and made lakhs of rupees selling a "high-truth" info distillate to those who could afford it. Early versions had a direct human interface, which could explain the interface scars. His investors were the likely reason for the tattoo. Venture capitalists tended to obsess about the health and security of key personnel. Netpulse no doubt still tracked Jigme's vital signs.

Later news had a darker tone. Jigme's business had apparently suffered as he spent more time wired-in, and less and less of that time for business reasons. He had gravitated to the "flier" worlds, sensory realms that were a serious addiction even for many adults, much less someone barely adolescent. The investors found ways to work around him. Then Jigme dropped off the news-scope, around the time he would have shown up at DIID.

His occasional edge now made a bit more sense. The boy who slogged through the daily meditation and pot-scrubbing at DIID was only part of the picture. Somewhere behind the ochre robes lived a restless soul.

The driver nosed his limo toward the curb and popped Gita's door. Street noise poured in with the midday heat. Gita put on her sunglasses and stepped out into the heavy air. Above, drums thumped a rhythm. A band chanted.

Too much input
No constell-a-shun
All roads one-way
No conversation

Wzrds—she remembered the band's name, looking up just in time for *Wzrds—band or bot?* to strobe bright blue onto her retinas.

She smiled. *Some* promos worked. It was good stuff, perfect sync. Listen, look, *bang,* here's a meme!

Too much input
No constell-a-i-a-i-shun

She entered the Rasa Media building and took the elevator upstairs. In her office, a bearded face smiled from the wall display: her boss Dev.

"Namaste," he said.

"Hi. What do you have for me?"

"I see your trip to the mountains has refreshed you."

"It usually does. What do you have?" Let's skip the small talk, she thought. Middle-management constructs were always just a bit too chatty for her taste.

She plopped down at her desk and poked it out of its suspended state. As it warmed up, a gang of miniature Frankensteins shambled across its surface, wires trailing from their heads like rainbow deadlocks. Then Jigme's voice "'Lo, Gita—" she put the mail on hold. "So, what's up?"

"Big project," Dev said, still grinning. "Very important."

"That's nice, Dev. For whom?"

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"Very important." Dev said. "A nationwide campaign, travel related. Their current program is underperforming. This should be an easy one for you."

"Send me the specs," she said with a wave. "Now let me settle in."

"Yes." Dev vanished and the wall panel returned to its light-teak pattern. Gita called up Jigme's message—a bit of text and a software attachment encrusted with crypto. He was in Rajkot already, working long hours, mostly DIID stuff. He hoped she'd "warped to" city life without too much damage. He'd hooked up with some old friends, but still hoped to pass through Mumbai in a few days before heading east. He'd check in then if he could. He asked her to save the attached program for him.

Gita smiled. She looked forward to seeing him again. But the "old friends" part worried her a bit, given what she'd read about his past. Fliers, like other hardcore addicts of the past, could be a pretty rough crowd.

Mr. Bhose was a tall, sober fellow with hair molded into a shiny ridge in front. At his insistence, they met over lunch at the Hilton. He seemed concerned that the Rasa office might be bugged, which Gita found amusing.

"Two problems so far we have been unable to solve." Bhose said. He paused, wagging a finger. "You will want to write this down."

Gita patted her handbag. "I'm already recording it."

He looked mildly annoyed, but went on. "Our promotions in Kerala and Gujarat are a disappointment, and we have decided to replace our agency. We are told that your company has greater capabilities."

"Most of our competitors lack constellation." Gita said, frowning at her word choice. She tried to avoid technical terms with new clients, but the Wzrds lyrics were apparently loitering in her synapses.

"Constellation?"

"The ability to organize complex input," she said. "All of our agents are thoroughly trained in the manipulation of sound and image."

And neurologically tuned, though this stayed out of the sales pitch. Some customers were squeamish about the details of a technical education.

"So, our 'constellation,' " she continued, "is usually better than that of our competition. Also, we're the oldest net media company. We have privileges most firms lack, and thus access to the many layers of comm strata."

"Yes, so I've heard. Actually, that touches on the second problem. Our promotions seem to be under attack. We thought at first we had programming errors. But as the disruptions grew in scope, we realized that the source was external."

"It can still be programming error, or contamination. Radiologic or climate influences. Voxels can develop a mind of their own."

Bhose smiled for the first time. "No, it is none of those. You can see for yourself." He slid closer and took out a small viewer, scanning the restaurant as the clip loaded.

An idealized Himalayan landscape appeared on the screen—fields of barley, sunlight on the distant, slate-blue peaks. A few dozen young men and women raced through knee-high grass in the foreground.

"Keep in mind that we are promoting travel and emigration," Bhose said. "Promoting the clean air and endless opportunity in the north."

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The youths sprinted on. The view panned left to right, then crept in as the action dropped into slo-mo. A soft-drink jingle played. The youths stopped in unison, turned to the camera and smiled. They hoisted bottles of Kampa Kola.

"We are *not*," Bhose said grimly, "in the cola business."

Gita nodded. "I gathered that much. Do you have any idea who's responsible?"

"No, not yet. But the tinkering must be shut down."

"It's not our primary work, of course," Gita said. "But we've dealt with such things before. We should be able to lock them out."

"Good. We have set up a secure mail link with Rasa. I will send you our specifications. Some of them might be a bit cryptic, as we follow a need-to-know model. Email me if you need clarification. But you will certainly have enough to begin."

"Fine," Gita said. "Is it possible to visit one of your sites?"

"Yes," Bhose said. "I was about to suggest that. I have in mind a large Gujarati town not far by train."

From the Express, the shanties were like mottled-gray shelves extending for miles, government-issue gray polymer replacing the wood slats or corrugated metal of the past. Gita wished there were fewer of these encampments, but despite boom times, they remained.

Toward the horizon, a layer of yellowish smoke from an unidentifiable source hung in the air.

She turned away and took her palmkit from her bag, mailed Bhose her hotel info. It'd save him the trouble of looking it up. Then she brought up her scanning program and configured it to monitor pirate transmissions on her cue.

The train pulled into Annala just before noon. Gita sent her bags to the hotel and went up the stairs to the second-floor terrace of the station. Below, sedans and three-wheelers jammed the street on the near side of a parkway. Beyond the broad median, traffic flowed smoothly northward—bicycles, taxis, and a profusion of the new teardrop cars mass-produced down south.

Annala fit a profile favored by Bhose's company. Though a college town, it had a large population of young rural migrants looking for work. These were Bhose's primary audience.

A crackling sound, evidence of outdated voxel technology, moved across the square from right to left. The air above the park turned hazy. A trio of turbaned guitar players appeared. *Aik, doe, teen!* they sang, swiveling their hips and sneering. Gita smiled. An Elvis trimurti. *One, two, three! Three! new flavors of poppadam chips!* They finished their jingle unmolested, unworthy of hacker assault.

After a few seconds, the air crackled again, and the Himalayas materialized above the park. Young men and women scampered through fields of rippling barley.

Gita reached for her bag and cued the palmkit. Full-size, the visuals looked better. An opaqued upper layer created a nice mountain-dawn effect despite the midday sun. Even at the syntagm level, the promo wasn't

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that bad, really. The imagery was a little hokey, but the voiceover did a good job of building emotion in proper sync. And, really, it was difficult for untuned minds to organize all these symbols to maximum effect. Very hit-or-miss.

Her palmkit beeped. The intruders had arrived, unaware that their little hacks were being monitored. Above the park, the idyllic scene began to decay. The youths abruptly stopped running. They clutched at their necks, flopped down in the grass, writhing. In seconds, they mutated into a pack of doglike animals, howling, fighting, fleeing down the hill.

Below, tires screeched as drivers and pedestrians stopped to stare up at the melee. The camera zoomed to a whimpering canine face as the voiceover touted a "new world" up north.

The scene faded. There was a brief silence, then laughter, cheers, applause.

She shook her head. No wonder Bhose was concerned. The hacked promo was getting rave reviews!

Gita flopped onto the hotel bed and took out her palmkit. Across the room, the phone blinked at her from a desk.

Ignoring it, she nudged the palmkit's gelpad and brought up the captured data. Voxels were simple devices, and a strong enough signal could overpower the instructions sent by local towers. The frequency graphs, however, showed only the standard cellular and broadcast signals. Likewise, the voxel bands displayed only the standard feed. The hackers had apparently not taken a cheap-and-dirty route. This was no surprise, really. Cheap-and-dirty attacks typically used visual static or a promo freeze-up, not a whole new scene.

She grabbed the remote and switched on the phone's voicemail. There was a message from Bhose. New developments made it necessary to "expedite." They needed the replacement promo by Friday morning. He wanted assurances she could meet that schedule.

Gita laughed softly. It was already Tuesday afternoon, and she couldn't start in earnest until she returned to Mumbai. Someone would have to explain to Bhose what it meant to work with a first-tier media company. He could propose a schedule, of course, but Rasa had the final say. If things didn't work out, he could find another vendor, like many before him. Friday morning! It was absurd.

She switched modes on her palmkit and pulled up Bhose's phone number. Before she could dial, Dev's jolly face took over the screen.

"I'm glad you called," Gita said. "Have you seen this latest business from Mr. Bhose? I was about to phone him."

"Yes," Dev said. "He has been communicating with us."

She waited a few seconds, expecting more. Dev seemed to be spinning through some challenging batch of logic.

"About the schedule," Gita said. "I'm thinking probably two weeks. I have a disinfect operation to take care of first."

Dev blinked at her.

"That's just a rough guess," she said. "I'll have something final by tomorrow."

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Dev blinked again.

"Dev? Are you rebooting?"

"Gita, we have no say in this. Mr. Bhose sets the schedule."

"I don't understand."

"We must conform to his schedule."

"Rasa doesn't do business that way. Let him go to some shop in Mangalore like he did last time."

"Mr. Bhose sets the dates."

"Dev, you are not making sense. *Why* would Mr. Bhose set the dates?"

"I cannot provide all details right now," said Dev.

"Come on, Dev. I know this routine. You will not provide the details ever. What's going on?"

Dev stared, likely sifting through his data to find a few crumbs he could pass along. "This project is arranged from Delhi, from the P.M.'s office. It must be done. We must follow the Bhose schedule."

"You have to give me more than that."

"I cannot," Dev said. "Can you do the work?"

Gita laughed uncomfortably. "This is high-risk. If we ship a shoddy promo, we look bad. Or even end up in court."

"Can you commit?"

"You're ignoring my objections. Do I need to quote the company guidelines to you?"

"They do not apply in this case," Dev said. "Gita, you are our best. You were specifically requested for this project, but I must have your commitment. If you cannot meet the schedule, I will make another associate available."

Gita stared. Dev smiled on, oblivious. No churning in *his* gut. No *gut*. Clearly this project had some sort of national importance. It troubled her that Dev would not explain things, but in the end, what real choice did she have?

"Gita?"

"I'll do the work."

"Good," Dev said. "Very good. I know this is unusual. I understand how difficult—"

"Save it. You can help by assembling operations teams for each of Bhose's sites. I want them to be ready to act as soon as I locate the cause of the interference."

"Yes. Of course."

Dev's face blinked out.

Gita sat back, puzzled. From the P.M.'s office? What was going on?

She noticed a glint of neon color above the phone. A second message. Tiny wire-head Frankensteins shambled across the display.

Jigme was late.

Gita sat in the back of the Kwality Coffee as instructed, sipping from a cappuccino and scrolling through data on her palmkit. She had found an anomaly just before leaving the hotel. Many of the Bhose voxels sent out incorrect handshakes, more than could be blamed on voxel flakiness. This suggested hand-delivered, air-borne infectors, released at the site—a labor-

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intensive approach, but harder to trace and fix. Most security firms could block radio interference, but curing a physical voxel infection would require Rasa's access privileges. Bhose had probably known this before he approached them.

A short figure wearing a beige raincoat, mirror sunglasses, and baseball cap entered the shop. Gita studied him. "Jigme?"

He nodded, took off the sunglasses.

"Nice look," Gita said. "Sort of pervert chic."

He opened his raincoat slightly, flashing the ochre robes. "Not quite."

He looked tired, she noticed, and a little pale. "I thought you were in Rajkot, on DIID work."

"I was. I'm hoping to return tomorrow."

"What are you doing in Annala, of all places? And why so cloak-and-dagger?"

Jigme sat down at the table. "You need to understand something first. The people I'm hanging around with do not want me talking to you. We had some loud debates about this. Which I lost, by the way."

"These are the 'old friends'?"

"Yeah, some of them, from the bad old days at the end of my previous career. The wire-head days. They're not my favorite people, but one can't always be so choosy. They're fighting for a good cause. What we're doing is important."

"Hm. And this would be?"

"The less you know, the better," Jigme said. "But you have a new client, right? Government stuff. This guy Rabindra Bhose?"

"That's private company info, really."

"Come on, Gita, I don't have much time. No one knows I'm here, or that you're involved in this Bhose thing. I'm doing my best to protect you, but you have to help out."

"Protect me from whom?"

Jigme shook his head. "Forget about it. You're safe. I've made sure of that. But you need to stall this guy. He'll probably push you to move faster. Resist."

She didn't tell him that Bhose had already asked. "Why wouldn't I comply? He's an important client."

Jigme sighed. "Do you know what his business does?"

"Job placement," Gita said. "Relocation, travel."

"To where, exactly?"

"To the northeastern provinces."

"You know, there's not much work up there. Not much of an *economy,* really."

Gita nodded. "I suppose not. I didn't really think about that. It's none of my business."

"Yeh, too much to care about, right?"

"No, I don't mean it that way. But my job is to put up a new promo, not to investigate our clients."

"Well, Mr. Bhose is a *special* client."

"Special?"

Jigme touched her wrist. "We're fighting in Sikkim, right? Well, when

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the youth of India gets to those barley fields, they'll find that the only jobs available involve firearms and fatigues."

"I'm not happy to hear that," Gita said. "*If* it's true. But I'm not a fan of Chinese land-grabs either."

Jigme shook his head. "*Chinese* grabs? You must get your news direct from the Delhi propaganda feeds. *We're* doing the grabbing up there!"

"Come on."

"Check for yourself," Jigme said. "The information's not that hard to find. What's important is that, if I'm telling even a tiny bit of truth, you have to stall. Don't help them ship a fresh load of cannon fodder. A hack-proof promo will fix their recruitment problem. And I'm guessing that yours will be a lot better than the current one, anyway."

"One would hope," she said flatly, thinking about the impossible deadline.

"So can you buy us a little time?"

Gita sighed. "Jigme, it doesn't work that way. If I don't meet the schedule, someone else will take over. They'd lose a week at most."

Jigme smiled, nodded. "A week more of anti-promo might just be enough."

She flashed a skeptical look.

"They're *losing,* Gita. They're on the verge of major embarrassment up there, of being chased back into Sikkim. Which would save a few lives now, and might cool down the war industry in general. Not gonna save the world, but it's a step forward."

Gita shook her head sadly. "Jigme, I wish I could help."

"You can. Even a few days might work."

Gita shook her head. "No, I can't. The hack-proofing is already in progress. The existing promos will be protected in another day or so. And I'm fresh out of rehab and on a very short leash. You're asking me to lie, falsify progress reports, and then fail utterly on the project. To damage my career for what would probably have no real impact at all. My boss would replace me as soon as I missed the first-cut date."

Jigme sagged. "I guess this was a long shot."

"It was no shot at all, Jigme," she said. "It just wouldn't have worked."

"Seemed worth a try. Would've given me some leverage against some of the crazier people I'm working with."

"What does *that* mean?" Gita asked. "Are you in trouble?"

"We all have to take a few risks," Jigme said. "I'm not even here, remember?"

"I don't like the sound of this."

"Don't worry. Like I said, you're safe." He smiled sadly, pressed her hand. "I'll be in touch soon."

She sent a message to him when she got back to the hotel, apologetic, offering a vague hope that she could help in some way, though she could do little, really.

In the morning, she had breakfast with two operations guys who came in on the early train. They had already seen her data. They said they'd have the infection fixed by Thursday night.

Upstairs, she found no response from Jigme on the hotel phone. He hadn't

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sent to her palmkit, either. Was he angry with her? She checked her mail tracker. He had not even read the mail yet. Maybe he was too busy.

Her train was leaving in forty minutes. She'd have to reach him from Mumbai.

The next afternoon, the operations chief told her the problems were fixed. Ops had broadcast new code to immunize the voxels against peer reprogramming, and awaited her new promo.

Gita told Dev to interrupt her only in the case of emergency. She set her system to signal mail from Dev or Jigme, no one else. Bhose could reach her though Dev if he had to.

She hunkered in her office, laying out scenes. She had not forgotten Jigme's pleading, but what could be done? He hadn't even read her recent messages, as far as she could tell. She was on her own.

Sometime before dawn, Gita waited as the lights on her chromed tea machine counted down. She closed her tired eyes briefly, and recalled visits to coffee shops in the small town where she'd grown up—her father's big mustache, a boy scooping milky coffee from a huge wok, pouring from cup to cup in a long arc to cool it. Each coffee *wallah* had a trademark style. The shops were never especially clean, and the coffee equipment had seen better days, but some part of her missed those places, those simpler times.

She took her tea to the window, inhaled the cardamom scent.

Smelling salts, she told herself. Across the street, the glass-and-stone façades of office buildings showed briefly, then the street lit up and the drums of Wzrds began. The pink blimp rose toward her.

She smiled wryly. No constellation, indeed. Seemed an apt description of her state.

The digital display above her desk read four-fifteen. In a few hours, she'd release her promo to the network loaders. Once Bhose signed off, Ops would distribute it to twenty cities.

She sighed, easing into her chair. "Back to work," she told herself.

Get to work, consequences later. Maybe. She had taken Jigme's advice while on the train to Mumbai, quietly researching Bhose's company and the situation up north. She hoped to dismiss Jigme's views, but no such luck. Now Gita wondered about other Rasa projects. She had assumed that her position allowed her the good data—if not Jigme's "high-truth" distillate, then at least a fair approximation, and much better than the skewed noise of the mainstream feeds. But in reality, she seemed to be much lower on the feed-chain.

Fingers of neon color stretched across the window frame and desk as the blimp peaked and burst outside. She opaqued the glass fully and turned away.

"Restore."

Her office swelled with light. The last scene from her promo materialized. She had handled the other parts in a matter of hours, developing a montage that built up the themes of escape from the backwaters, heroic challenge, and the pristine beauty of the north. This final segment had gone far more slowly. She had used the battlefield drama from the Bha-

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gavad Gita, both risky and appealing because it was so familiar, so ingrained in the Indian psyche. She had considered the images often in recent years, and felt she could make something new of them. The message of action despite doubts and fears seemed a good fit for Bhose's needs.

"Run: battle," she said.

The view narrowed to Krishna's dark gaze, resolute but slightly abstracted, seeing ahead in time. Not the cartoon blue god, but a tired warrior, sweat etching paths through the dust on his cheeks. She had spent hours on the close-ups.

Krishna's speech about duty, impermanence, and destiny had passed. Now he and Arjuna stood in grim silence.

The camera pulled back, revealing twin seas of men, horses, and battered chariots on either side of a grassy field. Then the view narrowed in again. Arjuna's expression turned from sorrow to resolve, and he raised his weapon. The armies surged into the plain.

A tingle rose through her. She rewound, and ran the whole promo from the beginning. To her weary eyes, it seemed to somehow *work,* all of it.

Had she somehow produced her best under these impossible circumstances? She laughed quietly. Maybe she was delirious from sleep-deprivation.

No. Not *that* delirious, anyway. She had done this long enough to know quality, regardless of her state of mind, and this hastily conceived piece was good, perhaps great. Given the timeframe, a minor miracle. Yet, strangely, she felt no excitement, no real pride. She felt tired, that was about all.

The clock read *4:45*. She took a slow breath and touched a control on her desk, invoking the network security process. It asked for her digital keys, her voiceprint, handprint, eyeprint. The system on the other end pondered the information briefly, then opened a seeming hatch above her desk, ready for data.

She ran the promo one last time, then shut it down. As the system packaged it for network transmission, wirehead Frankensteins appeared atop her desk.

"Oh, great timing, Jigme," she said, rolling her eyes. Still, she was happy to hear from him.

When she opened the mail, her joy faded. It was an autosend from Netpulse, Ltd.

"Hello, Gita. I put this in escrow before I met you in Annala, to be sent if my life monitor stopped functioning and my programs validated the bad news. My journey, or at least this part of it, is over. I regret that I'll be unable to visit with you after all."

She paused the message. Though some part of her had feared for him since their last meeting, she could not accept that Jigme was gone. She brought up a Rasa profiler and checked his network accounts. Twenty showed, impressive even for someone as connected as him. All had been closed since she'd left Annala.

Jigme had registered her as a contact, so she'd hear of any break in his life-signal. A silent notification, since she'd shut down most of the mail alerts.

She brought up the mail queue. There were four items from Bhose

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about the promo rollout, a few pieces of spam masquerading as industry mail, a solicitation from her college's alumni association.

Then an item from Netpulse, sent late the previous evening. It contained a document affixed with the official seal of the State of Gujarat—a coroner's report.

She sagged back in her chair, stunned by the finality of it all.

"Oh my true friend," she said quietly. "My misguided, wounded friend."

She recalled his silly get-up in the coffee shop, and the hill-walks, and Dharamsala meals on a stone terrace above the morning mists. She remembered his smile, his obsessions, his endless energy. She had missed him the moment she left DIID. Now she would not see him again.

The hatch above her desk began to flash, warning that it would soon time-out and close.

She let out a long, heaving sigh and wiped her cheeks, then pulled herself up. She played the rest of the message.

"On the plus side, you're the sole owner of my last, best work—the attachment I sent after you left Dharamshala. It's encrypted, and here's the key:"

Beware the juggernaut my son,
The jaws that bite

She laughed softly at the Jigme-ism. Juggernaut. Jagganath. Lord of the World, Lord of Motion. *The claws that catch.* In the old days, zealots tossed themselves under the huge wheels of a flower-covered cart during the festival of Jagganath, in Puri. Over the years, the name morphed to "juggernaut," and grew the image of an immense, unstoppable force. Jigme had seemed fascinated with this vision of God.

Down in the streets, the drums started again.

All roads one-way
No conversation

She found his software and ran it. The program asked for the passphrase. She recited the key, and an old-fashioned power switch appeared above her desk, marked above with Danger! and below with "TROOT!" A scroll unfurled, its print in a circus font.

Truth!
Self-propagating.
Universally compatible.
Powerful.
Fast.
Effective.
(for all complaints)
Version 4.0.
Free!

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She flicked the switch. The image morphed into a bundle of dynamite and ticking clock. This time, of course, there'd be no wrapper requiring a Bhose sign-off. Jigme's code would ride Rasa's privileges into the heart of the net. She nudged the bundle. It tumbled into the floating hatch, and both faded away.

She thought of Oppenheimer at Alamogordo. What was the famous quote? *I am Death, shatterer of worlds*. A weird translation of the Sanskrit, actually, but poetic.

"I am Troot," she whispered. "Scrubber of worlds."

Outside, a half-hour later, it was a little past dawn. Tea wallahs pushed their carts, moving away down the street. A few birds chittered above. Gita located them on a window ledge and watched them fly off, leaving only the sound of the wind. No blimps, cartoon animals, barkers pitching product. By now, Jigme's code was rolling through systems everywhere, a shockwave moving at network speed, blocking all but the most pure, most true.

Gita smiled. Something would get through eventually. She was sure of it.

But for now, silence was breaking out like a blessing, all across the land. ○

A POEM REMINDING SCHOOLCHILDREN OF THE WONDERS OF ASTRONOMY

by Anonymous

Perhaps you knew,
Perhaps you forgot,
There is a planet made of snot.
Its moons—worse by quite a jot—
I *could* describe
But would rather not.

—Timons Esaias

Illustration by June Levine

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TAMMY PENDANT

Chris Beckett

Chris Beckett's first novel, *The Holy Machine,* is available from Wildside Press <*www.wildsidepress.com*>. The author's previous published stories (twenty-odd of them) all appeared first in the British SF magazine *Interzone.* A number of these tales have been reprinted in anthologies, including Gardner Dozois's 2002 *Year's Best.* Information about these works can be found at *www.btinternet.com/~chris.bb.* Beckett is currently "a university lecturer at Anglia Polytechnic University in Cambridge England, where I teach social work and social policy. I was formerly a social worker myself. I am married with three children."

"Tamsin Pendant. Tammy Pendant. Who is she, I wonder? Who on earth is she?"

Mrs. Ripping did her creepy little smile.

"I've been introduced to her. I've spent several hours with her. But when will I really meet her?"

Well, Tammy Pendant is me, yeah? But I didn't say nothing because it only encourages them.

"I've seen Tammy the tough nut who won't let anyone get close to her. I've met Tammy who wrecks her foster-homes. But the *real* Tammy Pendant, I've never met."

And she gave that smile—yeah?—that therapist smile.

She wanted me to smile back, but I never would, nor look her in the eyes neither. "Pendant's not my real name anyway. It's Blows."

Mrs. Ripping laughed her posh therapist laugh.

"Oh Tammy, Tammy," she goes, "you are wonderful! You distinctly told me when we first met that it says Tamsin Pendant on your birth certificate and that's what you wanted to be called. Because Blows was your stepfather's name."

"Well I've changed my mind haven't I? Anyway it says Tamsin Delaney on my birth certificate."

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Well, that was a big joke apparently because old Ripping laughed and laughed.

"You are *determined,* aren't you, Tammy? You're determined that no one is ever going to find you."

I yawned and looked out the window.

"I suppose Tammy Blows is quite appropriate really," said Mrs. Ripping. "Tammy blows her top! Tammy blows up her foster-homes!"

"Tammy blow-job," I go. "Tammy blows cock for a packet of cigs!"

I mean, did she really think she was the first person who'd ever thought of arsing about with that name?

"But Tammy blow-job is a name that *other* people have given you, Tammy," cried Mrs. Ripping. She came and knelt in front of me. She took my hand and started to stroke it. "There is *so, so* much more to you than that. I only wish you could see it. You're fifteen years old, Tammy, and you're clever and you're pretty and you're full of fight. You have a whole wonderful life ahead of you, if only you are prepared to reach out and take it."

I pulled my hand away. She's jealous really, I thought. I mean, who'd want a blow-job from *her?*

"I want to go now, please."

She gave a cunning smile, like she was up to all my tricks.

"No Tammy, not yet. You've got another twenty minutes with me, I'm afraid. As you know quite well."

So I shrugged and looked out of the window again.

"I say 'I'm afraid,'" said Mrs. Ripping, back over in her chair again. "But actually it's not me who's afraid, is it? It's *you.* And I wonder if you know what it is you're afraid of? Is it that you are afraid of being with me? Or is it perhaps . . ." and she paused and looked into my eyes like she was looking straight into my brain.

"Or is it perhaps . . ."

Stupid cow, I thought. I mean, I must've been to a dozen therapists. Does she really think I don't *know* what she's going to say?

"Or is it perhaps . . ."

"Or is it perhaps that *I'm afraid of being with myself?*" I finish her line for her in a rude hard voice.

Come on, clock, I thought, come *on.* Because I knew old Ripping would be quick enough to send me packing when the hour was up. She'd have me straight out the door to make way for some other poor sucker. And then she'd be all concerned about *them* at forty quid an hour. It's no different from whoring really, when you stop and think about it.

But now she was scuttling back across the room again like a fucking crab, and she was holding my hand and it was, "Well done, Tammy. Oh well, well, *done.* That wasn't easy, I can see. That wasn't easy at all. But that's the hard part. If you can hold onto that, we're half-way there."

Oh for Christ's sake, clock, come *on.*

"Being with your self," goes Mrs. Ripping. "Of *course* it's not easy, Tammy. Of *course* you want to run away from it. But you can face it. You're strong enough. You're *incredibly* strong, you know."

I didn't say nothing.

"Where *are* you, Tammy?" she sang out. "Where are you? Come back to

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planet Earth why don't you? It's okay! It's safe. I'm here for you! I'll catch you if you fall!"

Why would I want to come back *here,* I thought, pulling my hand away again. Why would I want to come back to this crap little beige-colored room? And the grey sky outside the window and the clock ticking and Mrs. Ripping's shriveled-up face, like an old lemon? And her breath, which smells disgusting. Why would I want to be *here?*

"Come on, Tammy. Take a risk. Where were you just then? What were you thinking about? You were far away from here."

Well, I was thinking about this shifter geezer I'd met. I'd been thinking about him a lot.

People like Mrs. Ripping didn't know about shifters. Even on TV, it was like "rumors" and "unsubstantiated stories." But on the estate, *everyone* knew about them. Everyone knew there were two or three of them right there in the Meadows.

They came from another world. They could go *to* other worlds too.

Well, as soon as I heard about them, I was asking *everyone* where they were. I'd have done anything to meet them. Because I'd always dreamed of other worlds, ever since I was a little kid and found out that this world is like food that don't fill you up. Well it *is,* isn't it? Like food you eat and eat until you're sick but you're still starving.

I remember we had a teacher once who read us this old story about this kid my age who went through a wardrobe into another world. The other kids were arsing about as usual, but I yelled at them to fucking shut up or I'd smash their fucking heads in. And the teacher laughed and said thanks for the support but could I please not swear in class.

The teacher gave me a tape of that story. I listened to it over and over—twenty times at least. I would have listened to it twenty times more as well, only this little kid I was fostered with nicked the cassette and pulled out all the tape. I kicked the shit out of the little bastard, I can tell you, so that was another placement finished. Foster carers say you are one of the family, but when it comes to it, it's their own kids they put first.

Anyway, a week or two ago I'd actually *met* a shifter in the pub, and he wasn't like what you'd expect. Because you expect them to be, like, *heroes,* don't you? But he was just a greasy little runt of a Scotchman with dirty black hair. The sort you could meet in the street and never give another look at except, like, to think to yourself, "I wouldn't touch *that* with a barge pole."

So this greasy little guy was like eyeing me up from the bar and I thought, "Ugh! He's storing me up in his mind for a little session later with a box of tissues." Only then he comes over to the table where I'm sitting and he leans across to me. I'm about to tell him to sling his hook when he whispers in my ear, "I'm a shifter, I am."

And I go "Yeah, and I'm from fucking Venus."

And he goes, "No, darling, I's no bullshitting or nothing. Come wi' me and I'll prove it to you."

So I go with him to a corner where it's quiet, and he takes out this scrumpled-up old envelope, and in it there was this ID card in there with

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his face on, and it was all shiny and official and that but it wasn't nothing like a proper ID even though it had this year's date. He had this page from a newspaper too with a picture that said it was the prime minister, only it weren't any prime minister I've ever seen on TV. And he had funny coins too: all the stuff that they say shifters carry with them.

And then he showed me this little dark-red pill.

"That's what we call a 'seed,' sweetheart. Swallow that, and in a few hours you'd be in another world. I got plenty more of those back in my place."

Then he told me how he was well hard and he'd killed three men, and nobody messed him around, and all that stuff, like all blokes tell you. Plus—which most blokes *don't* say—he told me he'd been in twenty different worlds at least.

"What's it like?" I asked him. "What's it like when you do a shift? I've heard it's like falling. Is that right? Like falling only you don't move and the world keeps changing round you?"

He laughed.

"I'll tell you all about it, sweetheart, if you treat me nicely. My name's Rogg. This is my number. Why don't you give me a call?"

Well, he must have been thirty or more, so that was twice my age at least, and he smelt like a toilet. But he'd got something I wanted—and the good thing was I'd got something *he* wanted too. So there were possibilities.

Only I'd have to watch it because blokes like him can get nasty and everyone knows shifters don't give a fuck about the police or nothing, seeing as they can get out of this whole world whenever they like. Like I said, *all* blokes tell you they've killed people and put them in hospital and that so you'll think they're hard and fancy them, and most of the time it's crap. (I mean where *are* all these dead people? You'd think the stiffs would be knee deep in the streets.) But a shifter—yeah?—I could believe he really would do it.

But still, if I played my cards right, I reckoned I could get some of those seeds off him. Maybe even nick the lot?

Mrs. Ripping laughed. Not being funny or nothing but I'd totally forgotten she was there! And of course she'd always got to prove to me that she wasn't bothered what I thought of her—yeah?—so she laughed at me. Therapists are all the same. They've always got to prove they're on top of it all and they can handle it. Even if it means putting you down and telling you you're crap, they've still got to stay on top.

I mean, if the therapy don't do any good—which it never does—it's always *your* fault, and never, never theirs.

"Well, all right then, Tammy, if you won't tell me where you *were*, then tell me what you were running away *from?* Are you running away from being the child of a rape? Or from the fact that your mother would have had you aborted if she hadn't left it too late? Or the fact that your stepfather abused you? Or the fact that you had to be taken into care? Or the fact that all those different foster parents gave up on you?"

* * *

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Mmm. Tricky one that. Very tricky.

I mean, if I gave Rogg *too* much of what he wanted, then he didn't need to give *me* nothing. And if I didn't give him what he wanted *at all,* well, he might take it anyway. (Don't get me wrong. I'm not scared of a little runt like that, but you never know what he might try.) So I'd got to give him just a little bit, yeah? Just a taste of honey, yeah, until I got what *I* want. But I'd have to be careful because he'd know that once I've got them I could get away from him for good, and he wouldn't want me slipping out of his clutches. So I'd have to make him think I wanted to be *with* him. Like it was love or something. Yuk.

I mean, he didn't wash or nothing. His clothes were, like, *shiny* with all the grease in them. Know what I mean?

"Which is it, Tammy? You'll have to deal with it sooner or later. No one can keep running forever. So why not now?"

That's another thing about therapists: the words they use that don't mean nothing. What does *deal with it* mean? What does *resolve it* mean?

But who gave a shit anyway, because I could see her eyes looking past me now at the clock on the shelf. The time was up.

So I thought I'd wind her up a bit.

"I'm afraid of being with myself, yeah?" I go, like really slowly, in this really sad little voice. "I run away from myself?"

"Yes, Tammy, but the thing is, you don't have to. Now that you've faced up to it, we can start to move on."

"Yes, but . . ." I go slowly. "It's just that . . . I don't know. . . ."

Really, I hadn't got nothing to say at all. I was just having a laugh because I could see her watching that clock, wanting to stop, but thinking to herself, "Shit, now Tammy's going to start crying and how am I going to stop her when I've just been telling her I'd always catch her if she fell?"

"I think," I went in that little sad voice, "I think I could perhaps tell you now. I'd probably better tell you all of it now. It's sort of a long story. . . ."

And she's like, "Um, that's great Tammy. I'm really pleased that you finally feel able to talk. But I'm afraid our time has run out."

"But I really need to tell you *now,*" I go.

"I *want* you to tell me, Tammy," she goes, looking at the clock again, "but you'll have to save it to next week."

So then I laugh at her.

"So I run away from myself, is that it?" I asked. "That's the big breakthrough, is it? The welfare have paid out all that money to you just so you could tell me I run away from myself? I could've told you that when I was five years old! I could've told you that when I was fucking two!"

Now Jaz I *did* like. Or anyway, I liked her when I saw her outside the clinic waiting in her car for me. Okay, she *was* a social worker, but she was funny and pretty and she wore sexy earrings.

Well, okay, I didn't really *like* her as such, but she was better than bloody old Ripping.

"All right, Tammy?" she goes.

"No, I'm fucking not all right."

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"Tough session, eh?" she said as she started up the car.

The arrangement was that she was taking me for a burger before I went back to the Unit.

"I *hate* that woman," I go, "she's doing my fucking head in. And *don't* tell me it'll help me in the long run because it won't make no fucking difference and you know that as well as I do. She's just a stupid old cow with a face like a fucking lemon. And her breath smells like shit."

Jaz was, like, looking round to back out the car, so she didn't say nothing. But I could see she was trying not to smile, so maybe she didn't like old Ripping either.

"Four more sessions, Tammy," she goes. "That was the deal. We agreed you could move out of the Robert's house and move back into the Unit, as long as you went for therapy to try and figure out why you can't cope with foster-homes."

"Well, I'm not going no more," I go. "So what you going to do about it? Send me back to the Roberts? I'll fucking trash the place!"

We came to the Line. Jaz showed her ID to the cop and we drove through and out of the estate. Then she turned to me.

"Do you know what, Tammy? I wish just *once* in your life you would discuss the pros and cons of something without immediately starting to make threats."

I didn't say nothing. I just thought, stupid cow. I mean that was crap just now when I said I liked her. I hated the bitch. She was worse than old Ripping.

"I mean, apart from anything else, Tammy," she goes, "I spent literally days negotiating this deal for you, trying to convince people, trying to get money, trying to persuade people that you really were going to use your time in the Unit constructively and not just take up an expensive bed that someone else might have needed and been able to use. And now you just chuck all that work away! Have you any idea how much time it takes me every single time you decide you can't hack your placement and want to go somewhere else? I feel a bit used, to be honest. I feel a bit as if you don't give a damn about me."

Well, I just laughed, didn't I?

"Me care about *you?* Of course I fucking don't! You're just doing your job, aren't you? You get paid good money. You go off on your holidays in Greece and India and fucking Thailand. Don't tell me you think about me when you're lying on the beach out there. You're thinking this is nice and thank fuck I don't have none of those bloody dreggies here to have to deal with. So why should I care about you? You give me one good reason!"

Well, she couldn't think of nothing, could she?

"Yeah," I go, "and you can stuff the burger while you're at it. That'll save you some of your precious time and money. Just take me back to the Unit."

She didn't say nothing. She just pulled the car over and then did, like, a three-point turn and drove back to the Line again.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Taking you back to the Unit, as you requested."

Oh shit, I thought. I didn't really *want* to go back to the Unit. I wanted

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to have a burger with Jaz and chat and laugh and wind her up about her earrings and her boyfriends and all that. I was only having a laugh with her, wasn't I? I didn't mean nothing.

"I'm sick of your games, Tammy," goes Jaz, "and I'm not going to play them any more."

I didn't say nothing, of course. Who gives a shit anyway? I thought. I never liked the cow. I don't like burgers neither.

"Well, you won't have to worry about me soon," I told her. "I've met some shifters. They're going to give me some seeds. Soon I won't be in this world no more and you won't never see me again."

Jaz sighed. "More threats, Tammy?"

She stopped outside the Unit and let me out.

"See you next week, Tammy!"

"No you fucking won't! You won't *never* see me!"

But she just laughed and off she went, the bitch! She didn't believe me about the shifters. She thought it was just another wind-up. Well, I thought, I'll prove her wrong.

I walked round the corner, got out my phone and called Rogg.

Well, I felt scared didn't I? And lonely.

And anyway, Jaz shouldn't never have left me on my own.

She's not supposed just to drop me off outside the Unit. She's supposed to see me inside. So it's all her fault, really, isn't it? What happened is all her fault.

"I want you, Rogg," I go in my sexiest voice. "I can't stop thinking about you, yeah? I want you now."

Well, he couldn't believe his luck, could he, the dirty sod? Next thing was he was over in his beat-up old car, that greasy Scotchman with his black ponytail and his yellow teeth like fangs. And he took me back to his place, which was one of that row of houses off of Beveridge Street. He'd broken into the building round the back and made a sort of den in the back room. There was an old settee in there and a dirty mattress on the floor with a metal baseball bat beside it and a couple of wank-mags for reading matter.

Well, straight away he'd got his hands all over me and up under my T-shirt and my skirt and everything, and his tongue halfway down my throat, so I was like, "Hey hang on, sweetheart, I want it as much as you, but we've got all day, haven't we? And we got things to discuss."

"Yeah, like what?" he laughs.

"Like what turns you on, Rogg," I go, disentangling myself from him so's I could go and sit down on his settee, "like what *really* turns you on."

So he tells me and it's a long list: young girls with no panties, young girls in white socks, young girls looking at his wank-mags with him, young girls doing it with one another while he watched . . . all the usual pervy crap.

"And do you want to know what turns me on about you?" I whisper, when he's let up a bit. "I like men who don't give a shit about no one."

Which really *is* what turns me on—yeah?—but not when it's some greasy little perv like Rogg.

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"Yeah, well, that's me, " he goes. "I'm a warrior aren't I? I'm a warrior of Dunner."

Which Dunner is like the god of the shifters and he's got a big hammer in one hand and zigzag lightning in the other—and he don't look much like pervy little Rogg I must say. But I don't say nothing.

"And I *love* the fact that you're a shifter and you've been to other worlds," I go.

"Loads of other worlds," he says, "and I'll go to loads more too. I'll keep on going till I find Dunner's world and nae bugger's going to stop me, know what I mean?"

"I'm scared you'll go on without me and leave me here on my own."

"No way, Tammy," he goes. "You's coming with me. You's coming with me whether you like it or not. No way am I giving you up."

"You won't swallow no seeds except with me?" I go, because everyone says if two people swallow them and stay together, then they end up going to the same world, but if you take them when you're apart, well you don't never see each other again, because there's like millions of worlds, millions and millions of them.

"I won't, Tammy, so long as you make it worth my while, know what I mean?"

And now he's kneeling right in front of me, and running his hands up under my skirt, so I've got to think quick and play my cards in the right order.

"I need a drink," I go. "You got some beer or something?"

Well, he fetched out a six pack of Special Brew and I kept pretending to drink, and kept opening more cans, but really I let him drink nearly all of it.

And then I'm, "Baby I want to do it with you. I want to do it with a real shifter, a real warrior of Dunner. But I want to see the seeds first. I know it sounds weird but the idea of it really turns me on."

Well, anything that turns me on is okay with him by now. He goes out of the room and rummages around somewhere and then he comes back in with a big bag of dark red pills.

"Let me hold them," I go.

He gives them to me.

"What's it like," I asked him. "What's it like when you do a shift?"

He sort of laughed.

"I cannae describe it really. It's like the world sort ay dances round you. You see all kinds of weird things. Sometimes you see things even before the shift happens. Sometimes you see, like, your ain life, but different. Like other lifes you might have had."

He laughed and put his hand up my skirt again. "But are we not getting off the subject here, Tammy?"

"No, we're not," I go, making my voice all breathless like we're already doing it. "No we're not. This is what turns me on. It's making me so hot you wouldn't believe it."

Then I saw him looking at his bag of seeds and I knew he'd ask for them back if I didn't act quick.

"Do it to me now baby," I go. "I don't want to wait no more."

So he did it, didn't he? It took him about ten seconds and when he'd

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done he started to cry and talk about how he'd never had a real mum and he cuddled up to me like *he* was the kid and I was the grown-up. So I stroked his head and called him baby—and pretty soon with all the Special Brew in him and that, he was off to sleep.

"Just got to go outside and have a piss," I go, "I'll be right back."

"Mmm. Yeah," he goes.

I lifted him off me, put on my shoes and clothes and very carefully picked up that bag of seeds so it didn't rustle or nothing.

And then I was out in the back garden, which was all brambles and that, and rusty old shopping trolleys. I put the seeds in my pocket and climbed up on the back fence.

But I'd only just got on top of it when Rogg came running out.

"Tammy, you bitch!" he yells, "You little whore! I'll fucking kill you."

He was naked, no shoes or nothing, but he was so desperate to get those seeds back that he came after me anyway. He must have looked like a cave man or something, running after me through the streets with his little dick swinging about and his metal baseball bat in his hand.

"I'll fucking kill you, you lying little whore!"

He would have and all. I mean I'd nicked his precious seeds and without them, who was he? Just a common dreggie. Just a pervy little Scotchman who no one had ever given a fuck about and no one ever would.

But it was sort of fun too—exciting, yeah?—because I knew all the little hiding places, like the little alleyways between the houses and the holes in the fences. I started to laugh. No way would that little creep ever be able to catch me. It wasn't long before I'd shaken him off and then I stopped and swallowed down one of those pills. It tasted like blood.

After that, I only had to keep him off my back for a couple of hours or something till the stuff worked and then he'd *never* find me. So I hid in this big patch of thorn bushes in the playground near my mum's old place. It was all overgrown but there were loads of little tunnels in there through the undergrowth and I crawled right into the middle.

I called my mate Jolene back in the Unit to say goodbye and I weren't going to see her no more and she was "Oh my God Tammy!" and screaming and crying and "I love you Tammy!" and all that. But then I heard Mr. Johnson the Unit manager in the background going "Who are you talking to Jolene? Is that Tammy? Let me to talk to her please," so I hung up and switched off my phone.

It was all quiet and peaceful after that. I looked around. There was an old packet of cigarettes, and a broken bottle, and a popsicle wrapper, and a scrunched-up page from a lingerie catalogue, and a used rubber hanging from a thorn.

I thought to myself, these are going to be the last things I ever see in this world. It was funny, really.

But when I'd smoked my fifth cigarette, and nothing was happening, and I was wondering whether I should take another of them seeds just to make sure, I heard someone outside.

"She's in here, I reckon, Rogg. Kev saw her go in from his window and he reckons he'd have seen if she got out again."

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And then it's Rogg himself.

"You in there, Tammy, you little bitch? You's dead meat, you hear me? You's going to fucking die."

And another bloke goes: "I'll go in round here, mate, and see if I can smoke her out for you."

Rogg must have been busy on the phone, getting his mates to look out for me, promising them a treat. What was I going to do? I tried to call the Unit but the phone there was busy. So then I tried to call Jaz.

"You have reached the offices of the Child Welfare Section. Our office is closed at the moment. If you'd like to . . ."

I was really scared now. I start to call 9 . . .

"There she is Rogg, I can see her!" yells some geezer, and I can see him squeezing through the tunnels in the thorn bushes.

I dropped my phone and started running as fast as I could in the other direction, doubled up, with thorns catching on my arms and my face and everything. And then, oh *shit* there he is, Rogg, right in front of me, not bare now of course but in his greasy jeans and his old T-shirt with the skull on it. But he's still got that metal bat in his hands.

"Well, well, well . . ." he goes, "this *is* a surprise."

"Oh shit, Rogg," I go, "don't be like that. I was only pissing about, mate. Here's your seeds. I'll . . ."

There was a shout from across the playground.

"Hey! What's going on!"

I'll tell you what, I've never been so pleased to see the cops.

Rogg hissed like a snake. He snatched the bag of seeds out my hand.

"I've no finished with yer, Tammy Pendant!" he shouted as he ran off.

He'd torn the bag, I noticed, as the coppers came running up. Some of the seeds had fallen on the ground. I wanted to pick them up but I didn't want the cops to see me doing it.

But one of them had sharp eyes and saw me looking. She was one of that bottled-up sort of woman cop who sound like they are half strangling themselves so as to make themselves speak polite when really they think you're a worthless fucking scumbag. She spotted the seeds and showed them to the other one when he came back, a big fat bloke, all red and shiny from trying to chase after Rogg.

"What's going on here?" he puffed.

"Look at these, Colin," goes the policewoman grimly.

They weren't police that normally worked on the Meadows or I'd have known them.

"Have you taken one of these?" the woman asked me.

"Nope."

"Come on, now," said the bloke, "we want to help you but you're going to have to tell us the truth."

"What's your name?" goes the woman. "Let me have a look at your ID."

She looked at my card.

"Tamsin," she goes, showing my card to the bloke as if she was handling dog-shit, "Tamsin Pendant a.k.a Blows a.k.a Delaney. We meet at last!"

"You've been reported missing," he goes. "We've been looking for you.

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The welfare people are worried about you, I don't suppose you're surprised to hear."

"Listen, Tammy," said the woman, who seemed to be the sharp one of the two. "I want a straight answer *now*. Have you swallowed one of these?"

"I already told you," I said, trying to avoid her eyes which were like fucking laser beams.

"Right, Colin," she snapped, "we've no choice. Straight down to the hospital for a stomach pump."

"You *what!*" I yelled.

They grabbed me and put on some handcuffs before I could do a runner.

"It's for your own good, Tammy," goes the bloke. "You might not feel that way now but one day you'll thank us for this."

Next thing, I'm in the hospital screaming and yelling and kicking and biting, and (which was the only good thing about it) generally scaring the hell out of all the other patients. And they've got about eight police there, and there are doctors and nurses and fuck knows what, and everyone was rushing around like headless fucking chickens.

But in the end they got me in this little side room where there was a bed and a chair. And the policewoman sat on the chair and told me her name was Laura. And one of the other police stood by the door and all the others waited in the corridor outside, all with all their walkie-talkies crackling and blathering away. Self-important jerks.

The Laura woman told me to sit on the bed but I wouldn't sit nowhere. I just punched things and kicked things and told them they were all shit and they couldn't do nothing without my consent.

Part of me was really scared and part of me wanted to laugh. I mean, anyone would have thought I was a fucking terrorist or something, not just some dreggie kid who'd done a shifter seed. I mean, what would any of them care if I *did* a shift? What harm would it do them? It would just save them time and money, I would have thought.

Then Jaz came in. They'd got hold of her at home. Plus my keyworker at the Unit, who is called Kevin and is a total wanker who talks with a stammer and goes red if anyone talks about sex. The Laura woman reluctantly let Jaz have a chair and got another one in for Kevin. Then Jaz and Kevin tried to have a conversation with me with all the police looking on and everything, and thinking what a pair of losers they were. I almost felt sorry for the stupid sods.

"Everyone thinks you've taken one of those shifter seeds, Tammy," goes Jaz.

"I didn't know you people believed they existed."

"I don't exactly know what I believe, Tammy, but I am worried you've swallowed something that may do you a lot of harm."

"They want your consent to do a stomach pump," goes Kevin. "F-f-for your own good."

"Well, I won't give it. I don't want my stomach pumped out."

But that wasn't the end of it, because then in came Jaz and Kevin's

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boss, the boss of the whole Meadows estate, with her fancy make-up and hair-do and her smart suit all buttoned up.

"I'm Janet Rogers, Tamsin. *Do* call me Janet."

And she had a doctor with her, like a consultant or something, a big posh geezer with smarmy hair and a loud posh voice like he was God or something.

"Who's coming next, then?" I go, "The Prime Minister? The fucking Pope? What the fuck does it matter to all you people anyway? What difference does it make to you if I do a shift or not?"

"We *care* about you, Tamsin," says the Rogers woman, looking so fucking *sincere* that it was a job not to puke.

"How can you care about me? You've never even met me."

Then the God bloke chips in.

"We're wasting time. I'm not prepared to wait any longer for the lawyers. We have to proceed with or without her consent or it'll be too late."

"Yes, but I can't . . ." began Mrs. Rogers.

"You can't go ahead without a lawyer to cover your back," goes the consultant. "Fine. I will take personal responsibility for this myself."

"What about me!" I go, "It's *me* you're talking about, you arrogant idiot! I'm not going to *let* you shove a fucking tube down me!"

"Yes," goes Jaz, who's still somewhere in the background, "what about . . ."

God hasn't got time for any of this.

"Then we'll do it under general anesthetic," he goes.

All the time I was thinking, come *on* seeds, just bloody *work!* I mean, it was hours since I took them and they're only supposed to take a couple or three hours. Even when I was going under the anesthetic, I was still hoping that they'd work and leave all these doctors and nurses and cops and social workers and all standing round an empty bed with their tubes and that in their hands, looking like a bunch of idiots.

But no such luck. When I came round, I was in the same old hospital, and what was more, someone I knew well was standing by my bed, looking at her watch with a pissed-off expression, like we had an appointment and I was late.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?"

I mean, it must have been three months since I last saw her.

"Well I *am* your mother you know, Tamsin," she goes.

Stupid anorexic cow. If you want to know what she looks like, imagine a skeleton dressed up as a cheap tart.

"You all right?" she goes, looking at my feet.

She couldn't never look me in the face.

"Yeah, great. Never better."

"I hear you caused everyone a lot of grief here earlier on."

She gave her thin little smile. She likes trouble. She likes grief. She likes other people getting put out.

"Why do they fucking bother?" I asked her. "I mean, they could have just let me go and saved themselves all the hassle!"

She shrugged. She never asked me why I did it, or nothing. She never

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said about how she wouldn't never have seen me again if they hadn't pumped out my guts. She just gave that little smile, like it was her own private joke.

"It's the same when I do one of my OD's," she said, looking at her watch again. "They all run round for a bit and it's sort of fun, but next day no one gives a toss. Sometimes I think I'll make sure I really kill myself next time and that'll show them. But then I think, no, it won't show them nothing. They won't give a fuck. It'll just be one less hassle for them. And no way am I going to give them *that* satisfaction."

Jaz came in a bit later, but I refused to talk to her. I mean, what use had she been when it came to it?

Then that policewoman, Laura, came in.

"Hi there, Tammy!" she goes, like I was her best mate or something.

I told her to fuck off. Who did she think she was kidding?

But I'll tell you what, it's true what they say about the seeds and how they make you see things and that. In the middle of the night, I thought I had really done a shift after all, because I found myself in this big field of red flowers and they were *so* fucking red and so, like, *clear* that I thought, this *can't* be a dream.

I felt like the little girl in that story.

But then this bloke shouted at me. I didn't even look to see who it was. I just ran. Next thing, I came up against a fence all round the place, a high fence with razor wire on top, all round the field and no way of getting out.

After that, I woke up, but the same thing kept happening over and over all night—the field of flowers, the shouting, the fence—over and over again, until my head ached so bad with it, it felt like it was going to burst.

What made it worse is that the Ripping woman was there all the time, like some kind of ghost. I couldn't see her but I could hear her voice.

"Who is Tammy Pendant?" she kept asking, "When are we going to meet her? She can't run away for ever."

And she laughed and laughed.

There were police there all night, outside in the corridor. They even followed me when I went for a piss. Next morning, all the rest of them came back as well: Mrs. Rogers, Laura, Jaz, Kevin, some other social work geezer, old Uncle Tom Cobley and all. They told me they'd got a secure order and I was going to be locked up.

"Not as a punishment, Tamsin," goes that Mrs. Rogers, "but for your own safety and so you can get the help you need."

More fucking therapy!

Well, I lashed out at her, didn't I, and I nearly got her too, only some big cop grabbed my arm and pushed me back down on the bed. Then I did a bit of the old screaming and shouting and biting to wind them up.

But my heart wasn't really in it, if I'm honest.

"Why do you do this?" I asked Jaz, when they've finally got me handcuffed in the back of a van, with her and Kevin and three cops to watch over me. "What is the point of it?"

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And I'll tell you what, I wasn't being funny or nothing, I really wanted to know. What *was* the point? What were they afraid of? What did they think they were going to achieve?

Of course Jaz came up with the usual stuff about how they cared about me, and wanted the best for me and all that, but that *can't* be true, can it? Because they might come crowding round you with their "help" and their "therapy" when you make trouble, but when you *really* need someone, you're always on your own, aren't you? Always on your own.

And anyway, I could see that Jaz didn't really believe it herself. She was having a hard time just forcing herself to look me in the eye.

The secure unit looked like an elephant house in a fucking zoo, with big high walls and huge metal gates that slid open to let us in, and TV cameras watching us and everything. I was scared and I cried and I even let Jaz put her arm round me, the useless cow.

"Jesus!" I go. "How many kids have they *got* in this place?"

"Only about twenty," goes Jaz.

"Twenty? Fuck *off*! All this for just twenty kids?"

Just before she left, Jaz told me she had a new job.

"I'll come up here and see you again, but then it will be goodbye, I'm afraid, Tammy. I'm so sorry to have to tell you now. I know it's not a good time."

I didn't care. I had got myself together by then. I'd seen a few of the other kids and I knew I could handle them. I didn't give a fuck about no one.

I mean, I wouldn't be there forever, would I, anyway? It's not as if greasy old Rogg is the only shifter in the world.

So who says I can't keep running forever?

Who fucking *says*? ○

KNOT

Perhaps you knew,
Perhaps you forgot,
Alexander deconstructed the Gordian Knot.
I'm not sure it helped him,
I'm not sure it did not,
But it probably worried the Persians he fought.

—Timons Esaias

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THOMPSON'S FERRY

Allen M. Steele

Two-time-Hugo- and Locus-Award winner Allen M. Steele lives in western Massachusetts with his wife Linda. Mr. Steele's most recent book, *American Beauty*, is a collection of stories published by Five Star Press. "Thompson's Ferry" is the fourth installment in his second "Coyote" series.

"They're coming."

Lars's voice came to him as a whisper, carried by the subcutaneous implant within his left ear. Clark Thompson looked away from the windswept waters of the channel to peer up at the Eastern Divide. The limestone bluffs were slick with the rain that fell from the lead sky; he couldn't see his nephew, but he knew Lars was hiding somewhere up there, watching the entrance to the Monroe Pass, the narrow river gorge that led through the Divide. Good. If he couldn't see him, then no one else would either.

Thompson touched the side of his jaw. "On foot?"

"Skimmer. Too large to get through the pass, so they're hiking the rest of the way in."

"How many?"

"Ten . . . no, twelve. Wait a sec . . . make that fifteen." A pause, marred by a thin ripple of carrier-wave static. "We've got a clear shot. Want us to drop 'em?"

Fifteen Union Guard soldiers, arriving on an armored skimmer from Liberty. From their vantage point on the ridgeline, Lars and the four men with him could easily pick them off, no doubt about that. But the skimmer was doubtless equipped with a 30mm artillery gun, and the patrol was still on the other side of the Divide, well within radio range of Liberty; if Lars attacked now, the squad would have enough time to call for reinforcements while they turned the gun upon the ridge. Better to let them feel safe, at least until they made their way through the pass.

"Hold your fire," Thompson murmured, "but keep 'em in sight. Whatever you do, don't let them see you."

"Got it. Out." A thin beep as Lars disconnected.

Cold rain pattered against the wide brim of his hat and seeped into his thick beard; it pelted the waters of the East Channel, raising a thin mist

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that obscured the figures standing on the pier next to the anchored ferry. It seemed as if everything had been cast in monochrome hues of black and grey: the colors of early Hanael, with summer a distant memory and winter only a few weeks away.

Pulling his catskin poncho closer around himself, Thompson walked away from the town lodge, his boots crunching against sand and pebbles. The people gathered on the pier looked up as he marched down the wet planks toward him: four men and three women, with his younger nephew Garth standing nearby. Everyone looked wet and miserable, but it wasn't discomfort that he saw in their eyes it was fear.

A tall young woman turned to him. "They're after us, aren't they?"

Thompson nodded. "There's a squad on the other side of the Divide. Guess the Matriarch doesn't want to be deprived of her dinner music."

A couple of wan smiles. This wasn't just another group of refugees from Shuttlefield, but the Coyote Wood Ensemble. Until a few days ago, they had been eight woodwind musicians, practicing their art together in peace, sometimes performing in public at the behest of the colonial governor. But then one of their group had made the mistake of composing a ribald song about Luisa Hernandez; someone had overheard the Ensemble rehearsing it, with the composer singing the lyrics, and the following day he disappeared.

So now the remaining members were on the run, and when you're wanted by the Union Guard, there's only one place to go, and only one way to get there. Many people had come here before them, yet the moment they'd arrived in town and told him their story, Clark knew that this time would be different.

Allegra DiSilvio shook her head within the hood of her waterlogged serape. "It's not us they want," the ensemble's leader said quietly. "It's her."

The older woman beside her didn't seem to hear. Frail and grey-haired, her thin arms crossed tightly against her patched second-hand parka, she stared at the channel with blank eyes. A bamboo flute was clutched within her left hand; it seemed to Thompson that she was holding it for comfort, a shield against a cold and threatening world.

"Sissy is . . ." Allegra hesitated, uncertain of herself. "Her son is Chris Levin, the Chief Proctor. If it wasn't for her, they probably wouldn't care less, but . . ."

Thompson held up a hand. "We don't have time for this. My lookout says they're on the way. It won't take 'em long to get through the pass."

A small pile of duffel bags was bundled together on the raft next to the rotary wrench. A canvas tarp had been laid across them; he stepped onto the ferry, kneeled down to tug at the rope that lashed them together. This was everything the group had with them when they arrived in town early this morning, the sum total of their possessions. Stepping back onto the pier, Thompson looked at Garth. "Better get moving," he said, then pointed to the biggest man in the group. "You got a strong back?" He nodded. "Good. Help my boy with the wrench. Four arms are better than two. Everyone else, climb aboard. Stay close to the middle and don't rock the boat. If you fall overboard you're on your own . . . once Garth gets going, he won't have time to stop and pick up anyone."

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The passengers glanced nervously at one another, but no one objected; one by one, they stepped off the pier onto the raft, finding seats upon the wet stack of duffel bags, with the man Thompson had picked as co-pilot taking a position next to the upright wheel of the wrench. Allegra was the next-to-last person aboard; she helped Sissy step onto the raft, then she paused to look back at Thompson.

"You still haven't told us what the fare is," she said.

For the last two years, Thompson had charged everyone who used his ferry. Colonial credits were useless here, because no one ever went back to Liberty or Shuttlefield; you paid with whatever you brought with you that could be spared, whether it be hand tools or guns, sleeping bags or spare clothes. The barter trade of outcasts.

This time, though, Thompson shook his head. "Free ride," he said quietly. "Next time I see you, we'll work something out."

Allegra gazed back at him. "Is that because we don't have anything you want," she replied, "or is it because we don't have anything you need?"

Thompson didn't answer the question. He impatiently cocked his thumb toward the raft; without another word, she climbed aboard, settling in next to Sissy Levin.

Garth was astonished. He'd never seen his uncle refuse payment. Before he could say anything, though, Thompson pulled his nephew aside, put his face next to the teenager's ear. "Whatever you see or hear," he whispered, "don't turn back. Just keep going, and don't turn back unless I tell you to."

The boy's eyes went wide. "But what if they. . . ?"

"You heard me. Rigil Kent will meet up with you on the other side. They know you're coming. Leave the raft and go with them."

"But what about you and. . . ?"

"We'll be along soon enough. Don't worry, we'll find you." Thompson clasped Garth's elbow. "We always knew it would eventually come down to this. Now get along, and don't come back unless you hear from me."

Garth's mouth trembled; there was wetness against his face that may have been tears or only rain. He knew better than to argue, though, so he nodded once, then stepped onto the raft, taking his place on the other side of the wheel. Thompson slipped the loops of the mooring lines off the pier grommets, then planted the sole of his right foot against the raft and kicked it off. Garth and the other man grabbed the wheel handle and began to turn it hand-over-hand.

Rain water sluiced off the cable suspended six feet above the surface as it fed through the wrench. A few seconds later, the raft was clear of the pier, slowly making its way across the channel toward the distant bluffs of the Midland Rise, half-seen through the rain and mist. The distance between New Florida and Midland was little more than two miles; with luck, the ferry would get across before the soldiers arrived.

Thompson didn't watch it go. Instead, he quickly walked down the pier, then broke into a run once he reached the beach.

He jogged up the back stairs of the lodge and pushed open the door. The main room was warm, a fire crackling within the stone hearth. It could

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have been lunchtime, with bowls of Molly's redfish chowder laid out across the long blackwood table that ran down the center of the room.

Yet there was no food today, only guns. On either side of the table, men and women were loading rifles they had taken from the hidden closet behind the bedroom where he and Molly slept. A few of the townspeople looked up as he came in, then they went back to fitting cartridges into the stocks and checking the sights of their scopes. No one said anything to him as he strode over to the storeroom that he'd made into his office.

As he expected, Molly was there. As calm as ever, she was selecting ceramic jars of pickled fish from the shelves, packing them into crates. "I don't know about these," she said as her husband came in. "I mean, they're marked last April, but I opened one and it smells like it might have spoiled." She picked up a jar, held it out to him. "What do you think . . . good or bad?"

Molly. Good old Aunt Molly. She had never quite become accustomed to the LeMarean calendar, preferring to use the old Gregorian system. Yet nothing had ever spoiled while she was in charge of the community food supply, although she kept records only on strips of tape and within her own head.

Thompson took the jar from her, took a perfunctory sniff. "Okay to me. Now, look . . ."

"Oh, what would you know?" Molly took the jar away from him, sniffed it herself, then put it back on the shelf. "I swear, you'll eat anything. If it wasn't for me, you'd be sick as . . ."

"Will you just shut up a second?" Molly lifted her head, stared at him in shock; in all the years they had been married, there were very few times he'd ever told her to shut up. "The fish is fine," he continued, "We'll eat whatever you give us. Right now, I just want one thing from you. . . ."

"Clark . . ."

"Stay in here." He lowered his voice. "Bolt the door, lie down on the floor, and don't come out until I tell you to."

"Oh, for God's sake, Clark. . . ."

"Honey, you're a great cook, but you can't shoot for squat, and I don't want to have to worry about you." He let out his breath. "I just told Garth to make himself scarce, and Lars can hold his own. Right now, what I need you to do is become invisible. Can you do that for me? Please?"

Molly's face betrayed no emotion, yet her hand trembled as she selected another jar from the shelf. "I'll stay here," she murmured, not looking at him. "Just be careful, all right?"

"I will. I . . ." He stopped himself. He had more to say, not the least of which was *I love you,* but the others needed him just now, so instead he gently lifted her chin and gave her a quick kiss. It was something, he realized, that he hadn't done enough lately; he felt her hand touch his arm, as if she was trying to hold him back, but he hastily withdrew from her. "Just stay out of sight," he added. "This'll be over soon enough." Then he left the storeroom, shutting the door behind him.

Thompson spent a few minutes with the militia, making sure everyone knew where they were supposed to be, what signals they would use. Only a few wore implants, with the others relying on headsets, but he warned

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them to keep radio communications to a bare minimum, to reduce the chances of being eavesdropped on by guardsmen who might be scanning the same frequencies. Firepower, though, was the major concern; although everyone was armed, the seven who had semi-auto carbines—Union Guard firearms, stolen or bartered for over the last two years—only had one or two spare cartridges of ten rounds each, while the remaining twelve carried bolt-action rifles—crude armaments bartered to them by Rigil Kent, hand-made somewhere over on Midland—which carried only four rounds, plus whatever they had in their pockets. Thompson placed the ones with the carbines closer to the center of town, where they would have the minimum range and maximum efficiency, and posted the ones with the bolt-actions farther away to back them up.

"Don't waste a shot," he finished, "and don't fire until you get my signal." He paused. "And one more thing . . . let me handle the leader."

Everyone nodded, except for Lonnie Dielman. "Why can't we shoot him? If you're pinned down, then . . ."

"If I'm pinned down, then take care of it. If the leader's who I think he is, though, then I want him alive." Thompson looked the younger man straight in the eye. "Just do as I say, okay?" Dielman shrugged, then nodded, and Thompson glanced at the others. "All right, then. Take your places . . . and good luck. Remember what you're fighting for."

Everyone nodded. They took a moment to shake hands with one another, knowing all too well that this might be the last time they saw each other alive, then they put on their jackets, pulled on their hats, picked up their guns, and stepped out into the rain.

Thompson was the last to leave the lodge. The rain was lightening up a little as he stepped out onto the front porch, but it was still coming down hard. From where he stood, he could see townspeople moving into position: behind the stilts supporting the blackwood cabins six feet above the ground, behind stone chimneys, behind chicken shacks and goat pens. The children had already been taken over to the other side of the channel, along with a couple of adults to shepherd them; the livestock remained where they were, if only to give the town some semblance of normality, and he hoped none of them would be caught in the crossfire.

He checked his carbine, making sure that a round was chambered and that the safety was off, then he opened the front door, propped it with a large geode one of the kids had given him as a First Landing Day present, and concealed the rifle behind it.

Thompson touched his jaw again. "Lars, where are they?"

"Coming through now." A pause. "Castro's with 'em."

Good. Just as he expected. "Stand by," he said, then he walked down the front steps and sauntered across the wet sand toward the center of town.

Company was coming. Might as well greet them.

The soldiers came out of the mist in triangular formation, fifteen men spread out across the rocky beach, marching into town with carbines in hand. Their rain-soaked fatigues were caked with mud up to the knees where they had waded across the North Bend after making their way single file through the pass; rain pattered off their helmets, and they slumped

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beneath the weight of their packs. A long time ago, he'd been one of them: just another grunt, sent out on yet another thankless task. Any merciful impulses he might have, though, disappeared when he discerned the black shape among them.

Manuel Castro walked without the encumbrance of a pack; his mechanical body needed no rest or nourishment, so it wasn't necessary for him to carry a sleeping bag or food. Beneath his black cloak, his ceramic-alloy feet clicked softly against the pebbles, leaving deep impressions in the sand behind him. Although the squad surrounded him, none of the soldiers walked alongside the Savant; it may have been in deference to his position as Lieutenant Governor, but Thompson suspected that it was out of loathing, and not a little bit of fear.

The soldiers were uneasy; Thompson could see it in their faces as they surveyed the tiny settlement with quick, nervous glances, taking in the dark and silent cabins, the absence of motion upon the wharf where kayaks lay upended near the empty pier. In sudden hindsight, Thompson realized it might have been better to have had a few townspeople visible; it might have helped preserve the illusion that their arrival was unexpected. Too late for that now; he could only hope that they didn't spot any of the snipers hiding beneath the cabins and on the rooftops.

The squad leader saw him, raised a hand; his men came to a halt, and he stepped forward, raising the carbine so that its barrel pointed toward the sky. "Good afternoon," he said. "I take it that you're in charge here?"

"Yes, I am." Thompson carefully kept his arms at his sides. "And you are. . . ?"

"Captain Ramon Lopez, 33rd Infantry, Western Hemisphere Union Guard." He hesitated. "If you say you're in charge, then you must be . . ."

"Clark Thompson, mayor of Thompson's Ferry."

Lopez raised an eyebrow. "Not Colonel Thompson? I was told you were . . ."

"Not any more. I resigned my commission a long time ago." Long before he decided to immigrate to Coyote, in fact, bringing his wife and two adopted nephews with him. He'd tried to put the past behind him, but when they'd discovered that the Union was just as omnipresent here as it had been on Earth, they and a handful of friends fled Shuttlefield, journeying on foot across the Eastern Divide to establish a small fishing village.

It wasn't long before others had joined them, the lucky few who managed to leave the inland colonies without being stopped by soldiers or proctors. With less than forty people living here, Thompson's Ferry was more like a commune than a town. Thompson called himself mayor only when newcomers came to town, and even then most of them stayed just long enough to barter safe passage across the channel. They'd had a lot of passengers lately; the Matriarch was cracking down on dissidents.

"Sorry you've had to come so far, Captain," Thompson said. "In any other instance, I'd invite you and your men to stay for lunch. As it stands, I hope you won't consider me rude if I ask you to leave."

A soldier nearest to the squad leader shifted from one leg to another, his left hand moving an inch closer to the trigger of his rifle. A faint smile danced at the corners of Lopez's mouth. "I appreciate your hospitality,

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Colonel . . . pardon me, Mr. Thompson. We don't want to cause any trouble." The smile faded. "But we believe that you've received some other visitors lately. We're here to take them home."

"Sorry, Captain, but that's not possible." Thompson pretended not to notice the restless corporal. "Again, I have to ask you to leave . . . please."

"Mr. Thompson, I don't think you understand. This isn't a . . ."

"Captain, if I may. . . ?" The Savant's voice was a modulated tonality from the grid-like mouth of his metallic skull, absent of accent or even, Thompson imagined, a soul. "Perhaps I should explain matters to the mayor."

Lopez hesitated, then stepped aside, allowing Manuel Castro to step forward. "Mr. Thompson . . . or may I call you Clark. . . ?"

"No, you may not."

A discordant rasp, like coarse sandpaper rubbing across tinfoil; it may have been laughter. "Very well. In any case, the situation is simple. For the last two years, the Matriarch has graciously permitted your settlement to exist out here, even though it operates a ferry that regularly carries Union citizens over to Midland."

"No law against that." Thompson shrugged. "It's a new world. A lot of room here for people to come and go as they will. If some folks want to leave New Florida and set out on their own, I see no problem with that. Don't you?"

"So long as they're not valuable assets to the Union, no." A softer rasp, one which may have been a sigh. "Until recently, we've allowed various . . . shall we say, undesirable individuals . . . to leave the colony as long as they weren't necessary to our growth. Indeed, we even went so far as to construct a bridge across the channel earlier this year, which would have served much the same purpose until it was sabotaged by anti-collectivist elements. . . ."

"Interesting way to describe the guy who built it." Thompson felt his throat go tight; he'd met James Alonzo Garcia, the architect of the Matriarch Hernandez Bridge, and had nothing but respect for him. "I understand he was executed."

"You have the facts wrong. He hanged himself." A moment lapsed, as if Castro was awaiting a rebuttal; when he didn't get it, he went on. "Even after the bridge was rendered impassable, we allowed your ferry to continue to siphon away those who didn't want to stay. . . ."

"Unless you stopped them first."

"Unless they were essential to New Florida's continued growth and stability. . . ."

"That's not the way I've heard it. From what I've been told, Luisa's got her panties in a bunch over the bridge. Now she's looking for . . . what did you call them, anti-collectivist elements? . . . under every bed. In fact, I hear you can't even sing a naughty little song about her without risking arrest."

"Oh, so you've heard about this already? Then someone who's visited here lately must have told you." Thompson felt his face grow warm. He'd let slip more than he intended. Castro half-turned away from him, raising a hand from beneath his robes to indicate the nearby pier. "A small

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group left Shuttlefield on foot yesterday, and we have good reason to believe they were headed here. They would have arrived either late last night or, more likely, early this morning. Musicians, mainly . . . and honestly, their departure is of no real concern to us, except that one of them is Cecelia Levin, the mother of the Chief Proctor of Shuttlefield. Mr. Levin is a close personal friend of the Matriarch. He's concerned about his mother's safety."

"If he's so concerned, then why isn't he here?"

"The Matriarch decided that this was a matter more suited for military intervention. As a former Union officer, I'm sure you understand."

Oh, indeed Thompson did. "And you're here because. . . ?"

"As I just said, we've tolerated this settlement because it was harmless. Now, by your own actions, you've violated the terms of that understanding. I've come here in an attempt to . . . well, establish a better relationship."

Thompson knew what Castro was saying. Stop carrying refugees over to Midland, and the Matriarch would allow Thompson's Ferry to continue as a remote settlement. Otherwise, it would be placed under Union control. The Savant was her voice, the soldiers her fist.

"Yes, they came through here," he said. "They arrived early this morning."

"Ah. Very good. And where are they?"

"I imagine they're almost across the channel by now." Thompson couldn't help but smile. "Sorry, but you're too late."

Castro said nothing, yet his right hand made a small motion. Lopez said something beneath his breath; hearing his voice through their implants, the soldiers raised their guns ever so slightly. "Don't make this difficult," Castro said. "Contact the ferry, tell it to turn around and come back."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll suffer the consequences." Castro hesitated. "Colonel, there's no reason to ruin everything. Give us what we want, and we'll go away."

"Simple as that, huh?" Thompson sighed, looked down at the ground. Then, as if he was mulling it over, he reached up with his left hand to tip back his hat.

This was how the revolution began.

In years to come, historians would argue over who fired the first shot at Thompson's Ferry. Some would say that it was the Union Guard, while others would contend that it was the local militia. Culpability was the issue, yet the fact was that a misunderstanding was at the heart of the matter.

Thompson thought he'd made his signals clear to everyone. If he touched his hat with his left hand, it meant that negotiations had broken down. They weren't supposed to fire, though, until they saw him reach up with his right hand and take off his hat. It was a good plan, one which allowed for a last-minute cease-fire; in retrospect, though, he realized that he hadn't counted on someone with an itchy trigger finger getting it wrong.

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The first shot came from the right, from beneath the cabin where Lonnie Dielman was crouched behind the front porch stairs. The bullet went wild, striking no one, but nonetheless it had the same effect; in the next moment, the soldiers raised their guns and locked their sights upon the cabin. Lonnie never stood a chance; heatseekers ripped through the blackwood steps as if they were plaster, and Thompson caught a brief glimpse of the young man as he went down.

A half-second later, the very air around him seem to explode. He threw himself to the ground as townspeople opened fire upon the soldiers. The guardsmen, caught by surprise by gunshots from all sides, crouched on the beach and returned fire in every direction.

Lying on his stomach, stunned by what had just happened, Thompson heard a high-pitched *ziiiing!* The sand a few inches from his face made a tiny implosion. That shook him out of his paralysis; he scrambled to his hands and knees, and bolted toward the lodge. Within his ear he heard Lars yelling his name, but he didn't stop running until he was up the front stairs.

He'd just managed to grab his carbine when a fireball erupted a few dozen yards away. He whipped around, saw a cabin going up in flames. One of the soldiers had produced a mortar, launched an incendiary grenade through the window. He caught a glimpse of Todd Bishop on the rooftop, about to leap to safety, only to be cut down before he could jump. Thompson raised his gun to his shoulder—he aimed in the general direction of the nearest Union soldier, pulled the trigger. Three shots and the guardsman went down, slumping to the sand next to another corpse.

From somewhere behind him, he heard Molly scream. "Stay down!" Thompson shouted as he kicked the lodge door shut, then he kept firing, aiming at anyone who was wearing Union colors. Time itself seemed to expand, with seconds becoming minutes and everything collapsing into a surreal montage.

Two soldiers sprinted for the goat pen, only to be killed before they made it. One of the goats brayed as it caught a stray bullet, then toppled back on its hind legs and sprawled against a trough.

Another cabin exploded, scattering broken glass across the backs of two men standing on the front porch. The guardsman wielding the mortar lobbed another grenade at a third cabin. By a small miracle, it missed the target, careening between its stilts to explode harmlessly on the beach behind it. The soldier who fired it barely had time to curse before blood spurted from his neck and he fell to the ground.

Juanita Morales, who'd refused to leave along with her two children, died while defending her home. She managed to take down two soldiers before a third put a bullet through her heart.

A lone guardsman, finding himself separated and with nowhere to run, abruptly dropped his rifle, flung up his hands. He might have been screaming for mercy, but it didn't matter, because his attempt to surrender was ignored. The back of his skull exploded and he fell backward, his hands still outstretched.

Captain Lopez, flanked by the three remaining soldiers, tried to retreat to the safety of the Eastern Divide. One by one, they were cut down by the

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men standing upon the ridge high above. Lopez was the last to go; in the final moment of his life, he seemed to stare straight at Thompson, as if asking how a former Union officer could do this to another. Then a bullet caught him in the back and he keeled over face first.

Just as suddenly as it began, it was all over. Fourteen Union Guard soldiers lay dead within the town center, crumpled brown forms whose blood seeped into the sand, diluted by the cold rain. Through the crackling roar of the burning cabins, Thompson could hear distant reverberations, gunshots echoing off the distant bluffs of the Midland Rise. Within his ear, he heard Lars give a rebel yell, repeated a half-second later from on top of the Eastern Divide. Down here, though, everything was quiet, everything was still.

No. Not quite silent or still. A dozen yards away from where he stood, Manuel Castro crawled on hands and knees across the beach. With his black cloak draped around him, he looked like a wounded slug that had emerged from the water, only to have a bag of salt dropped on it. As Thompson came closer, he heard a rasping sound, like a gear that had come loose and was now grinding against metal.

The Savant had taken a bullet, he realized; he was dragging his right leg behind him, and he was unable to stand. As Thompson stopped, Castro arched his neck, peered up at him from beneath his hood.

"You planned this, didn't you?" Less a question than a statement.

"You had a chance." Thompson let out his breath, not willing to admit the truth. "You didn't take it."

"Yes, well . . . so did you." There was no pain in the Savant's voice; if there was any emotion, it was only resignation. "So what do you do propose to do now?"

Thompson didn't answer at once. Nothing would have been more satisfying than to plant his gun barrel against Castro's head and squeeze the trigger. Yet even then, it wouldn't have done much good; the Savant was a cyborg, a human intelligence downloaded into a quantum comp contained within its chest, adjacent to the nuclear battery that supplied power to the body's servomotors. Castro's limbs were his weak points; if Thompson tried to shoot him in the head, the bullets would probably ricochet. Unlike the flesh and blood soldiers he'd led here, the Savant was virtually immortal.

At least three of Thompson's people were dead, with no telling how many others wounded. Two cabins were ablaze, with black smoke funneling up into the grey sky, and it was only a matter of time before the others would catch fire as well. Even if no one from the squad had managed to transmit a message back to Liberty, it wouldn't be long before other Union soldiers would arrive to investigate their silence, this time in greater numbers.

His town was doomed. No option left except evacuation; load everything aboard the boats, call back the raft, and make for Midland as fast as possible. He'd known this might happen; that was why he'd told Molly to start packing up the food and Garth to remain on Midland.

His bets were covered . . . except for one detail.

The raft creaked softly, water spilling across the rough planks of its

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deck as the raft moved across the channel. The rain had stopped an hour ago; the sky had cleared above New Florida, and now Uma was beginning to set behind the vast wall of the Eastern Divide. Yet dark clouds remained above Midland, and in the waning hours of the day a rainbow had formed above the channel, a translucent arch of orange and purple that seemed to form a gateway from one world to another.

"Damn, that's beautiful." Clark Thompson stood at the front of the raft, one hand braced against crates of pickled fish. "I mean, I've lived here two years now, and I've never seen anything quite like this." He turned to look at Manuel Castro. "What do you think? Isn't that something?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The Savant was seated awkwardly on the craft, propped up against a barrel. His cloak had been taken away from him, and without it he looked curiously naked: a robot with a thorax like an upside-down bottle, with narrow pipe-like arms tied at the wrists behind his back and spindly legs thrust out before him, the broken one at an odd angle, its knee ruined. "Do you see something?"

"The rainbow." Thompson turned to look at him. "You don't see it?"

"Sorry, no. My vision isn't sensitive enough." Castro lifted his head; multifaceted red eyes peered unblinkingly from his metallic skull. "I can see colors . . . even ultraviolet and infrared wavelengths . . . but things like sunlight shining through water vapor elude me."

"So you've never seen a rainbow?" This from Lars; he and Garth stood at the wrench, turning it hand over hand. The others aboard took little interest in the conversation; their attention was upon the receding New Florida shore, watching the flames that consumed the small village they had called home.

"Oh, I've seen rainbows." Castro didn't look back at him. "A long time ago . . . a little over eighty years, by Earth's calendar . . . I was flesh and blood, just like you. But nature wasn't as kind to my body as it's been to yours, so when I had the choice of dying as a human or surviving as a posthuman, I gave up watching rainbows."

"Do you miss them?" Thompson asked.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." Castro shrugged, an oddly human gesture. "Are we there yet?"

Thompson turned to gaze the other way. The eastern shore was still almost a mile away; the canoes and kayaks carrying Molly and the rest of the townspeople had nearly reached the Midland Rise, but it would take the slower-moving raft a little while longer to get there. "Almost. So what were you before you had yourself downloaded?"

"You'd never believe me if I told you."

"Try me. Besides, what do you have to lose now?"

Again, the queer buzz that approximated a laugh. "I was a poet."

"A poet?" Thompson looked back at him. "I don't believe you."

"Well, that makes two of us. I have a hard time believing that you were once a Union Guard officer."

Several people raised their heads. It wasn't something that Thompson kept secret, yet on the other hand everyone knew that he didn't like to talk about it, either. "We've all got our crosses to bear," Thompson said, looking away once more. "Tell me something else . . . why did you do this?"

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Castro didn't answer at once. "You know, I think I may be able to make out that rainbow. Not the same way you see it, of course . . . sort of as an atmospheric distortion. If you had my vision, you might be able to see it the same way that I do."

"Don't change the subject."

"I didn't." The Savant looked directly at him. "We see things differently, Colonel. You believe that you've just fought for your freedom. It cost many lives, and you even let the fire consume the rest of your town just to prevent it from falling into enemy hands, but nonetheless you think you've won."

Thompson didn't reply. By now the fire had reached the lodge, its smoke rising as a thick brown plume that obscured the white bluffs behind it. Somewhere within those flames were the bodies of everyone who'd died today, laid out upon the long table where he and the others had shared many meals together. He still felt the ache in his arms from hauling the blackwood logs with his nephews through the Monroe Pass. Sometimes freedom meant giving up the things you cherish.

"But the way I see it," Castro continued, "you're only resisting the inevitable. Coyote belongs to the Union. That's a fact. You may not believe in collectivism, but it's here to stay, whether you like it or not. And so are we."

"And that's why you came here? Because of some goddamn political theory?"

"No. I came here because I want to see the human race expand into the cosmos, and because collectivism is the only social system that makes sense. What you call freedom, I call anarchy. And anarchy doesn't . . ."

"Can't we just get it over with?" Lars interrupted. "I'm sick of hearing him."

He and Garth let go of the wheel. The raft drifted to a stop. They stepped across the sacks and crates to stand on either side of the Savant. Castro heard them coming, but he continued to gaze at Thompson with eyes that could no longer see the colors of a rainbow but nonetheless could make out the lines of his face.

"You think you've won," he went on, "because you've ambushed a Union patrol. But there's still more than two hundred soldiers where they came from, and another ship is on its way with even more. It's futile, Colonel. You're living on borrowed time and a few stolen guns. Give up now, and you may be able to get out of this with your lives."

Fists clenched at his sides, Thompson regarded the Savant with helpless anger. He didn't want to admit it, but Castro was right. They had managed to take down a squad of fourteen soldiers only because they knew the men were coming. Next time, they might not be so fortunate. . . .

"You're wrong," he said quietly. "You know why? Because this is our home. . . ."

"How noble. Pathetic, but noble." Again, the eerie laugh. "I hope someone carves that on your grave."

"I hope so. At least I'll get a tombstone."

Thompson glanced at his nephews, then cocked a thumb toward the channel. Lars and Garth bent over, grasped Castro's arms from either

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side. They grunted as they hauled the Savant to his feet. His body was heavier than it looked, yet he didn't fight back as they pushed him to the edge of the raft. Its weight thrown off-balance, the ferry listed slightly, water sloshing across the planks.

At the last moment, Castro stalled, yet the deck was too slippery and the cords binding his wrists were too tight. Behind him, the other passengers silently watched; there was no emotion on their tired faces, save perhaps for resentment.

"Any last words?" Thompson asked. The Savant said nothing. "Write a poem about this. You'll have time." Then he nodded, and his nephews shoved the immortal overboard.

Manuel Castro tumbled into the water with a loud splash. He sank quickly, without leaving so much as a bubble to mark his passage.

This was the deepest point of the Eastern Channel between New Florida and Midland; his body would plummet more than a hundred feet before it came to rest upon the muddy riverbed. He couldn't drown, because he was incapable of such a death, nor would he be crushed by the pressure of all that water on top of him, yet he couldn't swim or even walk. Trapped in an immortal form, marooned in the lightless depths of an alien river, he would have plenty of time to contemplate the nature of freedom.

Thompson watched him long after the Savant disappeared, then he picked up the black robe he'd taken from Castro. At first, Thompson was tempted throw it overboard after the Savant. Instead, Thompson folded it under his arm. Someday, he promised himself, he would raise it on a pole above the ashes of the town he'd built, the day he returned to build it again.

The poet was gone, and so was the mayor. Now only the colonel remained.

"All right, let's go" he murmured. "We've got a war to fight." ○

AN UNFORTUNATE SIDE EFFECT

Perhaps you knew,
Perhaps you did not,
There is a land that time forgot.
Lacking time, it lacks velocity.
Car races there
Are without ferocity.

–Timons Esaias

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THE SAINT

Phillip C. Jennings

Perhaps to some readers, suburban Golden Valley in Minnesota seems as exotic as Yazd or the capital of Kalmuckia, and the huge evangelical field house with its TVs and amps and seven thousand congregation rivals the Palace of Chess in strangeness. Living in such a place qualifies Phillip C. Jennings to tell the following story.

Listen. We Yazdis have farmed our desert from the days before any temple, from the days when the temple would have been a blasphemy, from the days of the fire-worshippers. No one can say, but the underground qanats are thousands of years old, and their purpose is always the same, water for our farms; even before we stocked them with fish.

We water at night, and we water by the stars. We farmers of Yazd are the world's best astronomers, because we measure our turns and open our gates by the rising of the stars along the celestial equator, so that my trees drink from when Bellatrix shoulders up, until Rigel trails over the horizon. We have seen conquerors and shahs, prime ministers and wardens, but we need none of these to keep our rules; honor is bred into our bones. Other people in other countries are different, I'm told, but we keep good order, and, for us, order is life. In these days, just as long ago, Yazd has no need for jails.

When dawn breaks, we head for our homes, and rest during the sun-scorched day. In winter, when it snows in the mountains, that's the time we send one from each family down across the salt-pans, to the blackstone quarry, to carve new columns and carry the pieces to the temple environs. This we will do until there are nine thousand columns and the temple roof extends over all, one column for each saint, though now the columns march out like a forest of stone into the courtyards, and the roof shelters only a quarter of this area, a central darkness lit by the glow of red glyphs that the wise are trained to read.

The news of the glyphs is sent down from steep orbit. Once every nine years, the southwarden comes to read, and then he reviews our work and our progress. Ten years ago I was the boy our family sent to do the winter work. Since then, I've married, but my son is not yet old enough, and each winter I continue to labor with chisels on blackstone.

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The story I tell is from last winter, when the southwarden came again, after the usual nine-year interval, cloaked against the wind and salty dust, roaring along in his ancient road-machine, to where we workers trekked on the route from the quarry, having picked up stones from the year before. Already he had consulted the glyphs and learned the will of the Eternal Empress, and he told us we had more important duties this winter than cutting and building. The realm had need of its nine thousand saints.

So my turn came, as always my family deemed likely, that I would be chosen and give my strength to the realm, to serve the Empress. With the others, I followed the warden's roadster to the Temple and we filed inside, each to undergo what for the saints was a wakening in new bodies. And I, Shastram (for this was my pre-saint name), kept my old self in the back of my brain, like a watcher, while my body became obedient with a saint's perfect obedience, forming up with the others in rows and ranks to hear the southwarden's next instructions.

"The Empress has divided the realm into nine thousand districts," said the southwarden. "Each of you is assigned to inspect your own, to further the Empress's interests, and report back if you see any signs of rebellion. Your tour of inspection must be complete by the new moon, to leave us time for a campaign if war is necessary. These are the words from steep orbit—the Mother of Queens has spoken."

"The Mother of Queens is our Eternal Empress," we said, chanting like the saints we had become.

"The Empress forever! The Realm forever!" Then the southwarden saluted and dismissed us, and the saint in my soul immediately knew where to go and what to do, taking my pack and launching on a long walk with a hundred others, while other groups went other ways.

The hills were a day's hike away. They were riddled with secret doors, which we saints opened with our secret words. Inside were hangars and armories, but my door opened to a motor pool. I went inside as fresh air displaced the nitrogen, to select my mount among the boffers who slept all the long years from one ninth to the next and the next—how many times over? The realm was already old when they were built. Now they had seen much service, and not all were in dependable condition.

I chose the boffer Tryphon the Red, booted him to life, and rode out. "Which way?" Tryphon asked.

"North at all speed," I said, and this is how I learned myself, from hearing my saint-part talk. "We skirt east of the Caspian Sea and then turn west, until we reach Kalmykia, and the Chess Palace in Elista, beyond the Volga River."

"The distance is two thousand klicks as the crow flies, and I am not a crow. ETA tomorrow at dawn," said the boffer Tryphon.

Darkness settled as we went north. I rode with dreamlike smoothness, though Tryphon's red legs blurred on four sides like fast pistons. In the starry night, habs whirled in close orbit and powersats shone bright, but I saw no lights here below, no signs of habitation across all that desert distance. Tryphon's eyebeams shone ahead. We would have made the trip in the estimated sixteen hours, but the maps the boffer downloaded from

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steep orbit failed to show the results of recent rain—rare in this part of the realm! The Caspian is filling up these days and creeping east, sands and shallows and uncertain footing. Though Tryphon slogged powerfully, we did not cross the Volga and reach the outskirts of Elista until the sun was well into the sky.

In the ledges and windows of former apartment shells, dolls sat watching us, creatures modeled on humans as boffers are modeled on horses, but these were worn dolls, rotting discards, good for little. Those with eyes turned their heads to track us, but neither waved nor spoke. "Spies, I suppose," Tryphon said. "The leaders in this place are now notified of our arrival."

"This was a great country for sheep," I said, revealing facts from my saintly memories. "Sheep and chess. The only Buddhist country in Europe, by a technicality, though concealed inside Russia. The line between Europe and Asia is drawn nearby."

"We've seen no sheep on our journey," Tryphon said.

"The land has been emptied. It can't be healthy," I said in answer. We rode on and sniffed the air. The great dome of the Palace of Chess rose distantly ahead amongst the crumble. Black bugswarms fled our approach. "Any houses of wood have been long since eaten," I said.

"I hope the Empress has better lands," Tryphon said, but my saint-mind did not like this talk, which might lead to disloyalty and was therefore impossible. Instead I answered: "I'll send up a prayer for the Empress's attention, but first we must learn what things have changed in eighteen years."

We rode, approaching the palace by a straight road. We followed a decorative route, made for tourists, with flowerbeds between two long flanking pools, but now the beds were fenced in and staked for vines, and the husks rustled in the wind. A low house lay spanning the middle, and smoke came out of its chimney. I leaned forward in the boffer's saddle: "Hello! In the name of the Empress!"

Out of the house came a fine young woman, generous of size and strength. "Where is the man Ilyan?" the saint in me asked.

"My father," the woman answered, eyeing the boffer. "He got disease in his lungs. He died five years ago."

"Where are the sheep?" I asked.

"The sheep had no one to protect them from the wolves of the steppe," the woman said. "My name is Ju. I'm the only one here."

"I bear no name," said the saint within me. "What of the schnegg that the Empress gave you for protection?"

"The schnegg—I feared he might be turning unreliable. He took it into his mind to guard the rail bridge across the Volga, some ways west of here. I was happy to let him go. The wolves do not threaten me. They aren't interested in my squash and corn and pumpkins, and my fences are good, and these two pools work like two moats."

"Aside from this unreliability, are there any signs of disloyalty to the realm? I have come here to review, and then make prayers to the Empress."

"I know your saintly temper. Father taught me. You have no humor, and

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are in earnest," said Ju. "But the wolves are neither loyal nor traitors, and to the west, where the land is well-watered, it's all e-zone; diseases and bugswarms. Even here the bugs get worse. Perhaps there are people to the east, but they don't come to Elista. So I speak for myself alone: I am loyal to the Mother of Queens. I am as loyal as I am to myself, because in this place, I *am* the realm."

My saint-voice did not soften as I spoke again: "Do you have anything to eat?"

"Come inside. I make a kind of bread from ground corn. I have food to spare."

I went inside Ju's house, furnished with rugs and chests and the plunder of Elista, and ate a breakfast, but we were mostly silent. Saints have no small talk, so it was all maps and questions to which she knew no answers. "You have ammunition here," I said, taking stock of these surroundings.

"I found it in the palace. I keep guns for protection," Ju said.

"All weapons belong to the Empress," I said.

"She will not mind my borrowing a few," Ju answered, smiling to herself.

Breakfast was soon over. I drank a warming tea and went out to my boffer. Tryphon and I rode up and entered the Palace of Chess, his metal hooves sharp on marble. We reached a room of glowing glyphs. There I prayed prostrate for the Empress's wisdom, and afterward I rode north.

The schnegg awaited me by the bridge at the Volga, atop a fort that he had made. His was a body of forty-six segments, each armed double-over with missiles. An *unreliable* schnegg with that much propellant might build rockets that could reach orbit. "I noticed your coming earlier today," the schnegg said, in a powerful voice across the distance.

"I'm here at the Empress's command," I said. "Will you come down?"

"I will," said the schnegg, moving with serpentine quickness. A race of silver glints and he was swallowed up in darkness and then flashed out the lower door. He bowed his head and I reached behind to the security plate, as if hugging a docile centipede, and entered 7-5-2-5-A.

The schnegg fell dead into forty-six pieces. The realm took no risks. I mounted Tryphon and rode back to the Palace of Chess, where I reported my success. "In any case, he obeyed my summons. He may have been reliable after all," my saint part prayed to the Empress.

"Now go to the woman Ju," the Empress ordered. "Serve her as men serve women, and perhaps there'll be a baby nine months from now. A loyal mother deserves a child."

I rode back to Ju's house and told her what the Empress had instructed. She nodded with a sober look. "A baby? Then what?"

"The realm endures forever," I said in saintly voice. We disrobed and lay on the carpets. Ours was a deed well done, and then I rose again and dressed. We drank more tea and I rode off, two thousand klicks back to the temple in the desert of Yazd.

Listen, you who hear my story; it was never possible that nine thousand saints would find nine thousand lands all loyal and in order, so this same winter we mustered under the new moon and went out. We were

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flown and airdropped onto a dry island south of Greece and the Peloponnese, where men, women, and children shot at us and we shot back, and blew up their harbor. When all were dead in that place, we went to the next, out in the Atlantic. But aside from two insurrections, loyalty was the rule, and the realm endures.

That was last winter. The saints sleep again for nine years, or perhaps eighteen, or twenty-seven, as the Empress decides. I am myself again, Shastram, whom you all know. I tell you this story because of the woman Ju, left in a land beyond the Volga, perhaps with my baby in her belly, otherwise all alone with no one to help her.

I remember the long ride across two thousand klicks. During that ride I never saw living man or woman or a warm hearth. How many of us Yazdis were saints last winter, and inspected faraway districts? Where did we see great cities of men, or factories making new things? No one speaks of such, only of disease and bugswarms. And emptiness. I have a thought on the verge of my brain that I am almost able to think, about the realm on this dark Earth below the habs, and about the Eternal Empress, about years gone by and about the future. It's a difficult thought, bending away from the easy paths of my mind, a thought that needs to be born.

Tomorrow, I begin a long walk to Kalmykia, to offer Ju my protection, if necessary to stay with her or bring her here, and along the way, I will be able to think that thought. What comes next, I do not know. This is my story, and it is not yet done. ○

UNPUBLICIZED!
or
OUT OF PRINT, OUT OF LUCK

Perhaps you knew,
Perhaps you did not,
There was a land that *Time* forgot.
And so did *Newsweek*, *Vogue*, and *Hot!*,
Which is why it's now
A vast vacant lot.

—Timons Esaias

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UNDER THE FLAG OF NIGHT

Ian McDowell

Ian McDowell's two novels, *Mordred's Curse* and *Merlin's Gift,* were both published by Avon. Mr. McDowell has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. In his spare time, he studies Pai Lum kung fu and Chinese Lion Dancing. The author wishes to "thank Walter Jon Williams and Neil Gaiman for their helpful suggestions." He adds that neither of these authors should be blamed for his use of the controversial claim that "Captain Charles Johnson" was actually Daniel Defoe.

Shaded from the blistering Jamaican sun by the *Sea Rat*'s overhang, the narrow alley was relatively cool, but so stank of fish, filth, and urine that Anne regretted taking the short cut. Cursing the mud that sucked at her boots, she turned a corner and found Gouger, Nate Whiskey, and Black Tom accosting a small, bespectacled man in what had once been a good coat, Nate and Tom pinning his arms while Gouger leered over him, giving the stranger the full benefit of his goblin countenance.

"I'll only be asking once," said Gouger gently, scratching the triangular hole where his nose had once been. "What business have you with that carrion?" He hooked his thumb downward at the canvas bag laying in the muck that fouled the stranger's brass-buckled shoes.

"Why don't you ask the man who hired you to get it back?" said the little man in an accent that suggested London and an education.

"The bargain with our employer was, no questions asked," said Gouger, his tone still cordial. "But it's a different kettle with *you,* my fancy lad, and, truth to tell, we're right curious as to why someone would pay good silver for a dead man's head." He pushed the little man's spectacles up onto his pale forehead with a grimy forefinger and held his right thumb close to his victim's exposed eyes. The nail on that thumb was exceedingly long and

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sharp, soaked in brine and coated with dried sap for extra hardness. "Mark this well," he said pleasantly. "It's the tool of a gouging man."

The little man's face was very white in the gloom. Anne wondered if he'd soiled his fine breeches yet.

"Back in Carolina, a poor man can't fight duels like the gentry do," continued Gouger, breath whistling through his exposed sinuses. "But he has his own honor to defend, and sometimes fancy folk wish to see him defend that honor and stake coin on it, in taverns and such. I used to make a pretty penny in Charleston, where sporting gentlemen wagered on me like a prize gamecock. They liked it best when I gouged, for I was a prime gouger. These thumbs could have a man's eyes on his cheeks as easily you might slide an oyster from his shell."

The little man looked hard at Gouger's thumbs, but did not flinch. "Why are you not still in Charleston?"

Anne repressed a snort. Clearly, a man such as Gouger was in Jamaica for the simple reason that he faced gaol or the gallows elsewhere. His was the sort that had once infested New Providence and Dry Tortuga, but now, in 1724, the onetime pirate strongholds were closed to the Sweet Trade, and its former practitioners dispersed across the Caribbean.

The small man had courage, for despite the sweat gleaming on his brow, his voice had remained calm. Most London gentlemen, if that's what he was, would be gibbering in terror. The question of just what he was doing here in Spanish Town kept her watching the encounter. So far, none of them had noticed her.

"I gave offense to the law, and it was agreed we should part company," said Gouger with a whistling snicker. "Now, that's the second question I've answered of you, and not gotten one answer back in turn. Hold him steady, lads."

Stocky, bald Nate Whiskey gave the little man's arm an extra twist, keeping his hand away from the hilt of his rapier. Anne suspected that Gouger had first engaged his attention while the other two crept up from behind, seizing him before that weapon could clear its scabbard. "Pop an eye on his cheek, Gouger," cackled Nate. "He'll sing then, right enough."

Despite his fine blond hair, the little fellow wasn't handsome, not like dear, dead Calico Jack, nor even boyishly pretty, like equally dear and dead Mary had been when dressed in men's clothes, but Anne found his wide-mouthed, snub-nosed monkey face appealing. What's more, he looked as if he could reward a rescue with good coin. If the heavy jug she was carrying hadn't been nearly empty of watered-down rum, she might not have intervened, but it was almost drained, and Nate's shiny pate made a good target. Gulping down the dregs, she threw the jug and drew her cutlass.

The next moment, Nate was on his knees in the mud, cursing and clutching his head, while the little man had slipped free of Black Tom, kneeing his groin in the process. Before Gouger could draw a weapon of his own, the little man's sword was out and gleaming in the fading afternoon light.

"My thanks, friend," he said, his back to Anne. "Stand by me and we'll rout this lot."

"Bitch, this isn't your fight," growled Gouger.

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"Ach, but it is now," said Anne lightly, happier than she'd been in a while. Life had been dreary since Calico Jack was hanged and she was pardoned.

Luckily, none of the ruffians had pistols, and only Black Tom wore a cutlass, while Gouger and Nate drew knives. They crouched there, glaring, until Anne lunged, her banshee laugh echoing in the alley, ready to carry the fight to them. She slashed at Black Tom, who backpedaled rather than attempting a parry, and when he lurched into Gouger and Nate, the three of them almost went down together.

"Come on, you bloody sheep," cackled Anne, "have the grace to die on your feet!" Rallying weakly, Black Tom aimed a cut at her that missed her by nearly a foot, and then her return stroke bit into his upper arm, making him yelp like a kicked dog and drop his weapon. The alley narrowed at that point, so much so that Gouger and Nate couldn't really get around him, and when he blundered into them, they took it as their cue to beat a full retreat. Cursing her over his shoulder, Black Tom followed them, and when she pursued them into the open street, howling like a monkey and scraping the tip of her cutlass against the wet bricks, the three of them broke into a clumsy run, their bowlegged gait reminding her of the way that panicked iguanas rear up on their hind legs. Anne waved in mock salute and watched them go.

The little man came up beside her, wiping his spectacles with a green silk handkerchief. Setting them back atop his pug nose, he gave her an appraising look, apparently noticing her sex for the first time, but not at all astonished at the sight of a grinning, six-foot Irishwoman in men's clothing waving a bloody sword. "Mistress Anne Bonny, I am in your debt."

She turned round, shaking long red hair out of her face. "True enough, but who are you and how's it you know my name?"

To her surprise, he bowed and kissed her hand, with nothing satirical in the gesture. "Tobias Constantine, late of London, at your service. I read about you in Captain Johnson's book. Clearly, you could be no other."

"I know no Captain Johnson," said Anne, stepping back into the alley in search of the bag his assailants had been after. Someone had kicked it into a pile of refuse. When she picked it up, she saw that the drawstrings were undone.

Constantine had followed her. "That's because the good captain is the *nom du plume* of a friend of mine, a scrivener name of Defoe. His *General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* was all the rage in London when I left." He held his hands out for the bag. "Believe me, good lady, you don't wish to look in there."

She already had. "Been quite a while since this lad had aught below the neck." Indeed, the head was little more than a wizened skull cushioned on a tangled mass of filthy black hair, much of which appeared to be its beard. The bag also contained a flat, calfskin-wrapped bundle and several smaller packages. She pulled the drawstrings closed. "Whose is it?"

Constantine gently took the sack from her. "I'm surprised you don't know the gentleman. Captain Teach is as infamous as yourself, if less well preserved."

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She smiled at that, more intrigued than ever. "I never met Blackbeard, for I'd found the docktowns of the Indies more hospitable than Carolina by the time he blockaded Charleston harbor, and he died not long after I went on the account." That last phrase was the common slang for taking up the pirate trade. "Did you steal his poor noggin from its pole in Virginia?"

"Not I," said Constantine, looking about the alley for something, which soon proved to be his tricorn hat, much of its Kelly green turned brown from soaking in a piss-smelling puddle. Wrinkling his nose in rather simian disgust, he dropped it back into the muck. "It was my former associate who sent a Negro shimmying up that pole, leaving another head in its place. I, in turn, appropriated it from *him*. As should be apparent, he wants it back, and is willing to hire the most desperate sort of fellows to fetch it."

Cutlass on shoulder, Anne followed him out into the sun-baked street, where heat danced on the cobblestones and shimmered in miniature rainbows over yellow pools of standing water. Above new Georgian brick and older palm-thatched adobe loomed St. Jago's whitewashed steeple, framed against the Blue Mountains that rose skyward into storm haze, but the wind was from the opposite direction, carrying the salt tang of the unseen and no longer much yearned-for sea, twenty miles down the Rio Cobre. That distance from Mother Ocean and her temptations was one reason that Anne lodged here in the new capital, rather than in the earthquake-sundered remnants of Port Royal.

It was too much to hope that Constantine might offer gainful employment, something she'd need now that she'd tired of being the mistress of the dissolute Christian Sotheby (who in truth had equally tired of her, once news reached him that Anne's da in Charleston had died leaving her still disowned). Nearly four years after her trial and her poor infant's death, she wondered if she was fit for dangerous work. Well, there was only one way to find out.

"You'll be needing a bodyguard, Mister Constantine."

The expression on his pug face was unreadable, but his green eyes glittered behind his spectacles. "Indeed, Mistress Bonny. Are you as formidable as your reputation?"

Anne hadn't felt formidable in some time, but she drew herself up to her full considerable height. "I was at the head of every boarding party, the year and a half I sailed with Calico Jack," she said proudly. "Me and Mary Reed were the best at cutlass work he had, and the only ones who put up a fight when caught. Doesn't your Captain Johnson tell you that?"

Constantine nodded gravely. "Is it true that you and Mistress Reed disguised yourselves as men, and didn't recognize one another's sex until you'd exchanged amorous advances? I'd wondered if perhaps saucy Daniel made that part up."

Anne stepped forward, towering over him much as Gouger had earlier. "It's no business of yours who I made advances at, or when or why, my fancy lad. Of course everyone on board knew Mary and I were women, the way our teats flapped in our shirts. We wore trousers because we couldn't fight in petticoats and I wear them now because this place is too damned hot for a dress. Now, will you hire me or no?"

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Constantine's grin made him look more than ever like a shaved ape. "Truly, Fair Amazon, I cannot let such an offer pass! Name your price."

Anne thought about it for a moment. He couldn't be too rich, or he would have already hired himself a whole gang, the way his former partner apparently had. "Four shillings a day, a brace of pistols, and the full tale of why you're carrying that head about, who you stole it from, and what you plan to do with it."

Constantine considered a moment before again flashing that crooked simian grin. "A bargain, then. I can give you two shillings now, with the rest at day's end, and your pistols once we find a gunsmith. As for my tale, that's best told in a tavern. Can you recommend one?"

Anne put her cutlass away. "That I can, though we'd best see the gunsmith first, with those dogs sniffing your heels. You'll be buying the rum, too. The real stuff, not watered grog."

Constantine extended an arm. "Of course, Madam. Lead on."

The *Rum Spaniel* was in a cool, dingy cellar beneath a stable, a gloomy cavern of a place where grizzled sea-rats slopped from cracked mugs at crude driftwood tables, cackling whores exposed their pocked breasts to likely customers, and every dice or card game was a potential knife fight. Constantine looked about with some dismay.

"Are we quite safe here, Mistress Bonny?" He had to strain to be heard over the uproar from the cockfight going on in the far corner.

Anne laughed. "I am, and you with me." She waved at a big, poxied-looking rogue with a crooked scar on his face and a bilious whore on his lap. "Ho, Ned Snavely, tell my friend here why you limp."

Ned's smile was all black gums. "Because you put a pistol ball in my knee when we were taken, you vicious bitch!" His laugh ended in an explosive belch. "Don't trifle with that one, Mister," he said to Constantine. "She's more dangerous than any man in this place."

The barkeep, a sour-looking lout with a dirty beard the color of seaweed, nodded impassively at the sight of proffered coin and handed her a fresh jug of rum. Anne cocked her thumb at her new employer. "My friend's a gentleman and doesn't swig. Give us cups, you graceless git." To her surprise, he rummaged under the bar and actually found two, handing them over with a muttered curse punctuated by a fart. "Ned was one of the few men on Calico Jack's ship they didn't hang," Anne said quietly as she took Constantine's arm and steered him toward a table. "If you're a sea artist, meaning, in his case, a good navigator, the judge will likely believe you when you claim to have been forced, because most pirates have no sailing skills worth a damn, and will press into service every good seaman they can find. 'Course, just like at most pirate trials, every man of the crew except for Jack himself claimed he'd been forced, but only Ned, the carpenter, and the musicians were believed, and Ned was lying."

"Why'd you shoot him, if he was one of your own party?" said Constantine softly as he settled gingerly onto his creaking stool, his face still shining in the gloom.

She remembered it all then, that fateful night off Negril Point; the midnight breeze lifting her dank hair and plucking at her loose shirt, Mary's

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bare bosom gleaming milk white in moonlight as she spread her own shirt on dry planking and idly pounded lice from it with her dirk pommel, the treacle-drip of tar from the rustling shrouds, and then the dark gliding shape of that bastard Barnet's stealthy privateer. The rest of the crew had been drinking below decks with a gang of Portuguese turtle fishermen, and stayed there when the women raised the alarm. "It's the downfall of most pirates, getting themselves too drunk to fight, and they cowered in their cups when the enemy hove to. Mary and me yelled and cursed and even fired into the hold in hopes of putting some spirit into the sodding bastards, but though I lamed Ned and Mary killed another man, it did no good, and she and I had to fight alone. We gave a good account of ourselves, though." She wondered what he'd think if she took off her shirt and showed him the scars, one neatly between her breasts from a cutlass slash, the other a few inches above her right hip, where she'd been lightly kissed with a boarding axe. "Better to die like men than to be hanged like dogs, I yelled down at them, but they were too busy quaking in their puke to listen to me. I later reminded my man Calico Jack of that, when they dragged him off to the gallows."

She and Mary would have swung beside Jack and the rest, if not for their swelling bellies. Christian Sotheby, one of several planters familiar with Anne's estranged father, had been an avid spectator at the trial, and Anne's pregnancy had not yet marred her figure. Loving Jack well enough in her fashion, but having no particular desire to rot in gaol for the sake of fidelity, she'd met Sotheby's appraising gaze with a bold one of her own, and his influence bought her pardon. Having no wealthy relatives, Mary had given birth behind bars, and died there, of childbed fever. Anne's own babe had perished soon after.

She swigged her rum, feeling it sting in the cavity where she'd recently lost a back tooth. So far, she'd kept all her front ones. "Enough of me. Why are you sneaking about alleys with Blackbeard's head?"

Tobias had yet to sip from his cup. "I was asking for directions to the Negro quarter. Those rogues offered to lead me, then turned on me once we were off the main street."

"And what do you want in Black Town?" Despite the name, it was more lane than town, as the district of Free Coloreds was understandably small, the vast majority of Jamaica's African-derived population either slaves on the plantations or Maroons, their escaped descendants in the mountains.

"I'd heard tales of the magic called Obeah. I hoped to find someone who could make this head talk for me."

Anne nearly spat out her rum. "Why, man, you're madder than I thought!"

"Nay, not at all. My former colleague Edmund could bring words from its dead lips. That's why I took it from him, once I found out who he truly serves."

This talk was making Anne's head spin more than any amount of drink could do. "It's witchcraft you're speaking of! They *hang* folk for that!"

Constantine had been rummaging in his bag. Producing the parcel, he unwrapped it, revealing a leather-bound book with brass clasps, a couple of candles, a quill pen, a small copper vial, and several musket balls. "Not

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so much any more, and never as much here in the New World as the old, despite the unhappy events at Salem. The Colonies have their share of Cunning Men, who are largely free to practice their arts, and in Pennsylvania there are the High Magisters of Germantown. But while I have some small experience of such Natural and Scientific Magick, my skills don't extend to necromancy."

Anne made the sign of the cross, something she'd not done in a decade. It was more sailors' superstition than good Irish Catholicism that shivered her spine. "I know an Obeah Woman more cunning than any hedgewife or apothecary. If anyone could make what's in yon bag talk, it's Mother Patience. But where's the profit in such an unnatural thing?"

Constantine lowered his voice further. "I want to ask Blackbeard where he buried his treasure."

Anne laughed explosively, her fear leaving her chest like phlegm. "You're daft, Toby! Is your Captain Johnson such a fool as to claim any pirate ever hid his spoils in the ground? The Sweet Trade's not near so lucrative as landlubbers think. Back in the days of the Red Sea Men and the buccaneers, maybe there was some that took great riches, from heathens in India and Spanish galleons here, but those days were over when my granny was a girl. Mostly, we seize bolts of cloth and barrels of whiskey and other trade goods, which we sell to coastal villagers in the Carolinas, and other places where folks don't like the Crown's tariffs."

Constantine looked at her with schoolmaster gravity, the ruddy color fully returned to his monkey face. "The treasure days aren't so long past as you presume. Blackbeard was never a Red Sea Man, but he first took sail as one of the last buccaneers, before England made uneasy peace with Spain and gave Henry Morgan a governorship for hanging his former colleagues. Before he turned his attention to the American Colonies, Blackbeard took at least one Spanish ship bound from Panama to Barcelona, and on that ship, he found a most rare prize."

Anne snorted. "You'll be after fairy gold next. Suppose Teach did such a thing, why would he ever bury it in the ground? A pirate crew divides its spoils, with the captain getting only one share more than anyone else. No man's share is ever large enough to be worth hoarding. Even those that did take treasure ships rather than merchant goods soon spent all their loot in taverns and whorehouses."

Constantine nodded, unoffended by either her scorn or her familiarity. "True enough, my bonny Annie, but in *this* case, Teach had something that couldn't be divided or sold to a common merchant. It looked like a plain iron pot, but if the merest drop of food or drink was poured into it, it filled to the brim, and stayed full no matter how much was scooped from it, only becoming empty when upended. The priest who took a mortal wound trying to keep it from him told him, with his dying breath, that the vessel was a very holy thing, a sacred relic brought to the Americas by Saint Brendan the Navigator, which Spain had discovered on a remote island and was sending to the Pope himself."

Anne shook her head. The man was surely possessed of a more extravagant kind of folly than that which had first driven her to sea. Perhaps, under those fine burgundy breeches, his little monkey cock was dripping

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with the pox, which had long since rotted his brain. Ach, no, that was too evil a thought, and besides, hadn't she been most deathly bored of late? Whatever else his fancies might be, they were anything but dull.

"How do you know this?" she said, as gravely as she could.

He straightened a bit. "I am an initiate in the School of Night, a secret order founded by Sir Walter Raleigh. A body of our eldest and most learned Masters had this story from Israel Hands, a former mate of Blackbeard's, who was lamed by him even more casually than you lamed Mister Snavely over there, and who became one of London's countless beggars when the knee his one-time captain so playfully shattered made him unfit for your so-called Sweet Trade. That is why I and my former colleague Edmund Love were dispatched to the New World, to bring this treasure of Blackbeard's back to Britain, where its powers and properties may be measured and studied by men well-learned in Scientific Magick and Natural Philosophy. Unfortunately, Captain Love loves Donnish coin more than the English Crown, and has been secretly working for our enemies. I considered Edmund a dear friend as well as a colleague, but I could not countenance his treachery. It is now up to me to ensure this wondrous object doesn't fall into foreign hands. If doing so requires wringing speech from a dead man's head, so be it!"

Anne wished she were by herself someplace quiet, where she could stretch out her long frame before a crackling fire, or better yet, in a swaying hammock, and digest what Constantine was telling her. That sparkle in his eyes could be madness or secret knowledge or some impossible-to-untangle mingling of both. Once again, she made the sign of the Holy Cross, her finger seeming to move as sluggishly as though the smoky, flickering air was water.

It had gotten oddly silent in the tavern. "Oh, aye, cross yourself, bitch! You'd best be making your peace with God!" She looked up to see Gouger, his face more ghoulish than usual in the candlelight, aiming a pistol at her from the stairway, Nate Whiskey crouched behind him, a bandage on his head.

"You'd best not miss," opined Ned Snavely, still fingering his popeyed whore. "She's fast and mean, and will have your guts out if you only wound her." The other denizens of the tavern watched with interest, and several of the cockfighters began to make whispered wagers.

The barkeep bent down and came up holding a blunderbuss. "There'll be no shooting of women here," he growled. "Least ways, not of any as well-known as Mistress Bonny. Besides, you could hit the man with her, who's not only a paying customer, but looks like quality, with relatives that might have Governor Rogers' ear." This was the first time, Anne thought inanely, she'd ever heard him say more than three words together.

Gouger sat on the stone steps, his pistol still trained on Anne, although he'd have to get much closer to have a real chance of hitting her. It made her feel warm inside to think that this fearsome-looking ogre might be too scared of her to come down to the tavern floor. "I only need to keep her and her gentleman here until Black Tom comes back with our employer. He's quality too, and will have good coin for any that helps in their apprehension."

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"Well, that's different then," said the barkeep, putting down the blunderbuss without giving Anne so much as an apologetic shrug. Men are all bastards, she thought, not for the first time.

Constantine had struck match to his candles and was using one to dribble a wax circle on the table. "Some help you're being, Toby," she said, not caring if he rankled.

"I'll be more help than you can imagine, should this work," he said through gritted teeth. "Keep him talking." He then unstopped his copper vial, which proved to contain a silvery, metallic-smelling liquid, and began writing with it on the tabletop, pausing to unclasp his big book and flip through its pages until, apparently having found what he wanted, he returned to his brushstrokes.

"What the Devil are you doing?" she hissed, intrigued despite her irritation.

"The Adversary has nothing to do with this," he muttered in a distracted tone. "My *gramarye,* so to speak, is the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses,* not some warlock's black tome. It contains the lost magical knowledge of the Hebrews, given by God and his Angels to Moses himself. Alas, I know only some of its secrets, for the magisters of Germantown were loath to reveal the whole of their art. Let us hope I learned enough."

Anne stood up and made herself stretch with what she hoped passed for catlike nonchalance, then thumbed the hilt of her cutlass. "Who thinks Gouger is a craven dog for squatting there with a cocked pistol rather than coming down here and facing me with steel?"

Several onlookers hooted. "No man who's seen you fight," brayed Ned Snavely. Taking his hand out of his whore's dress, he raised his bottle to Gouger. "I have little love for the bitch who lamed me, and wouldn't mind seeing her bleed, but truth is truth. If you're fool enough to come down here and face her, you'll soon be missing more than your nose."

Gouger picked either snot or a scab from the hole in his face. "I don't cross blades with women," he said in a tone that suggested he'd be more than willing to if he thought he'd win. "Now, if the strumpet would put down her cutlass and wrestle me, that's another story. I've not had a good gouging match in longer than I can remember, and I'd enjoy sticking my thumbs into those proud eyes."

Anne was calculating the odds of going for the shiny new pistols in her sash. If she made as if to draw and fire, would Gouger pull the trigger of his own weapon? If so, he'd likely miss, and she could rush forward and fire her own shot from a more accurate range. Deciding to chance it, she filled her lungs for a banshee scream.

As if he'd known her intent, Constantine grasped her belt. "Sit down, Mistress Bonny. In a moment, we'll be able to leave here calmly and safely."

Her blood was up, making the temptation to shake off his hand and rush Gouger very fierce, but then she looked down into Constantine's eyes, and something in that twinkling green compelled her trust. Besides, she was being paid to do what she was told.

She sat. Upon the table top, Constantine had drawn a six-pointed star within a circle, with words written at each point of the star, and in the spaces outside it, like so:

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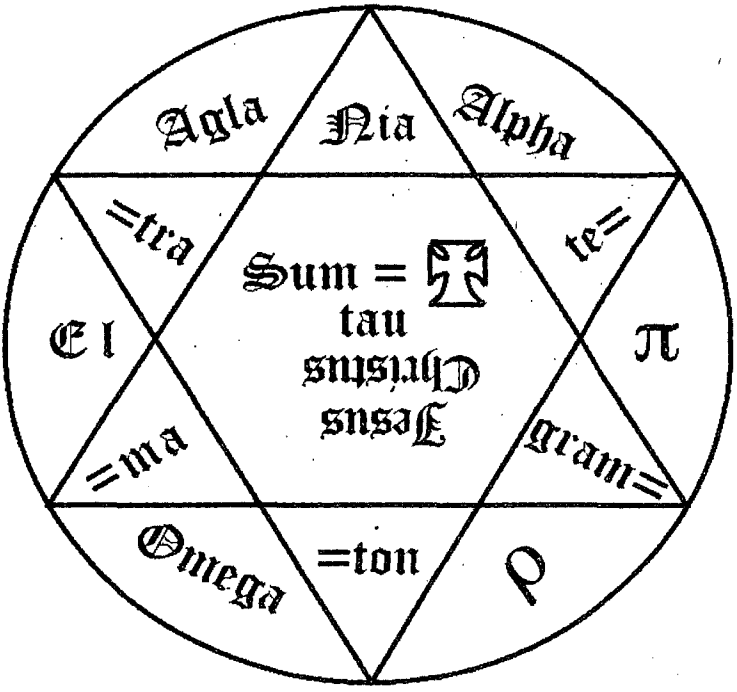

As she watched, marveling at his speed and artistry, he placed a musket ball in the center of the star, directly over the upside-down *Jesus*. "I've substituted the name of the Savior himself for that of Moses," he said softly. "Can there be diabolism in that? If you don't trust in me, do so in Him, and in His name take my hands." She did so, swayed more by those eyes that locked hers over the dancing candleflame than glib talk of Christ, and marveled at their smoothness. Even dear dead Mary had possessed a harder and more callused grip than this. Her reverie was interrupted when he began to chant.

"I, Tobias Constantine, a servant of God, call upon and conjure thee, Spirit Alymon, by the most dreadful words: Sather, Ehomo, Geno, Poro, Jehovah, Elohim, Volnah, Denach, Alonlam, Ophiel, Zophiel, Sophiel, Habriel, Eloha, Alesimus, Dileth, Melohim, and through the holiest words by which thou canst be compelled, that thou giveth thy protection to myself and this woman for as long as this candle flame shall burn. Fulfill now what I command thee, so surely as Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. Fiat, fiat, fiat."

Letting go of Anne's hands, Constantine put his book and paraphernalia back into his bag, the strings of which he drew and tied. Standing up, he straightened his coat. "I need to prove to you that my art is not false mummery," he said quietly, "and this seems as good a demonstration as any. If I've prepared correctly, I am temporarily safe from Mister Gouger's

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pistol. Mind you, this conjuration is not one that I've had the courage to put to scientific test, and it's possible I've botched it. But if he does shoot me dead, he'll have discharged his weapon, leaving you with two loaded ones, not to mention that cutlass you use so well. Good luck to you, Mistress Bonny, and I pray you, wish the same to me."

Before she could answer this, he walked toward the stairway. "Hold your fire, my goblin-faced friend. At least until I've reached the foot of the steps, where your ball will have a better chance of hitting me."

Gouger made a sound that might have been a snort if he'd had a nose. "Are you daft, you fancy ponce? Don't think I won't shoot you!"

"I expect you to," said Constantine. "Here, let me open my jacket and shirt, for I paid too much for them to have you putting holes in them. Are you a good enough shot to hit me directly in the heart?" Anne could not see his bare chest from where she sat, and some distracted part of herself wondered if it was as hairless as a girl's.

"The fool thinks himself a Hard Man," said Nate Whiskey, pulling a dagger from his belt.

"Not I," said Constantine, who was almost at the foot of the stairs. "Your employer, Captain Love, can make that claim, but I'm not naturally proof against bullet and blade, and so must take additional measures of protection. I should be in your range now, if you have the courage to hold your pistol steady. Are you going to shoot me, or is it your intention to frighten me to death with that ugly face of yours? Come on, my oafish friend, I don't have all day."

Several of the more hardened sea dogs actually chuckled, and there were low murmurs all around them. Anne heard the clink of coins, as more wagers were being offered. "Shoot him, dammit!" snarled Nate Whiskey.

Gouger shook his head. "Something's not right. Besides, if I do kill him, that bitch has two pistols in her belt."

"Don't let that concern you," said Constantine. "Mistress Bonny, if this unlovely lout kills me, I give you leave to divide the money in my purse between yourself, him, and his comrade, and order you to let them have the contents of my bag." His rapier flickered from its scabbard. "As you can see, I am not unarmed. Either you will kill me, or I'll run you through the body. Which is it?"

"Go to Hell," said Gouger, raising his pistol. The gunshot was very loud in that dank space, and smoke shrouded the stairway.

Standing, Anne drew her pistol, half-expecting to see her daft employer come stumbling out of the powdersmoke, blood pouring from his ruptured chest. Instead, something far smaller bounced down the steps and rolled across the tavern floor. Stooping, she inspected it. It was a pistol ball, misshapen as if by unyielding impact and still hot to the touch. Crossing herself for the third time in the night and the decade, she rose, picked up Constantine's bag and strode toward the stairs. The smoke's acrid tendrils were curling away into the general haze, revealing much the same tableau as before Gouger had fired. Taking her place beside Constantine, she glanced at his chest, which was indeed pale and hairless, and quite unmarked.

"How interesting," said Constantine softly. "I actually felt the ball hit

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me, although it didn't hurt. Now, shall we rout them?" Despite his calm words, she saw that he was shaking.

Anne looked up at Gouger's pop-eyed face, so white that it looked even more skull-like than usual. She smiled as she took aim at the cavity above his mouth and pulled the trigger. More smoke hid him and Nate from view, then Gouger's body came sliding out of it, blood bubbling from the hole where his nose had been, which was now larger and less triangular.

Constantine stared down at the corpse and whistled. "There's a shot worthy of a dueling gentlemen," he said. "I knew you were fierce and formidable, Mistress Bonny, but had no idea you possessed such skill."

Actually, she'd been lucky, for she should have aimed at the broader target of his chest, but the nasal cavity had been too tempting. She'd dropped the pistol and drawn her second one, and would have taken a less chancy shot at Nate Whiskey, but he was already up the stair and out the door.

"Take your bag, Toby," she said to Constantine, then retrieved and sheathed her discharged pistol. Holding the loaded one ready, she led her employer up into the fading daylight.

Mother Patience lived amidst hovels of mud-brick, but her own small dwelling was of coral and white-washed plaster, so clean and plain it might have been a tropical nun's cell. The pale interior accentuated the indigo blackness of her face; unlike almost every other free Negro in Spanish Town, she appeared more African than Creole, for she owed her freedom to skillfully midwifing three generations of Sothebys rather than the impulse of a white father. Of course, such liberty had not been secured until she taught her arts to a daughter, now an old woman herself, who remained in bondage on the Sotheby Plantation. Beneath her bright red scarf, her head was almost hairless, and the folded legs visible beneath the tuck of her calico smock were thin and sharp-kneed as those of a cricket, but her skin was remarkably smooth, as if time had polished rather than withered her.

There were no furnishings other than two large unglazed clay pots. Mother Patience directed her two guests to sit before her on a mat of dried marsh grass, which had been spread over a soft floor of what looked and felt like finely sifted white beach sand, making the dwelling resemble the inside of an hourglass. Constantine seemed fascinated by it, squatting at the edge of the woven mat and pouring a small quantity from hand to hand like a child.

"Bone," said Mother Patience in a voice like wind in the sugar cane.

"Beg pardon?"

"You hear me right, Cunning Man. That be bleached and powdered bone, mixed with crushed coral and salt."

If she'd hoped for a reaction of horror or surprise, he didn't afford her one, but instead blew the powder off his palm, tucked his coattails under him and folded himself down beside Anne with a grace more cat than monkey. "Clearly, Good Lady, you have just the sort of knowledge I seek." Untying his bag, he produced Blackbeard's head without preamble. "Can you really make what's left of this fierce fellow talk?"

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Mother Patience smiled, revealing four upper teeth and three lower ones, more than many white women her age still had. "Keep calling me a lady and maybe I make yon dead pirate sing. Can't promise him be hitting all the right notes, but probably couldn't do that in life."

"You can make a head talk, but you couldn't save my baby?" *Ach,* thought Anne, *there's the rum I've been drinking all day talking for me.* However, there was no anger in the old woman's button eyes.

"Saved you and the child both, didn't I, when you were bearing it? Might have saved it again, if Mister Sotheby had summoned me when it first sickened. Not my fault, him not caring so much if a dead pirate's bastard died. Maybe the poor babe's mother didn't care so much, neither."

Anne felt herself flush. Her father would have horse-whipped a Negro for speaking to her like that, but she'd ceased being her father's child long before she let Calico Jack steal her off to sea. "I never wanted it dead," she said, looking down at the pattern her finger traced in the powder that Mother Patience claimed was bone.

"Maybe so, maybe no," said the old Negress. "But done is done, dead is dead. None of that concerns what this fancy Cunning Man of yours want me doing now. He think I can make Captain Blackbeard say where his treasure. That fat book no tell you how to do that, Cunning Man?"

Constantine smiled ruefully. "While my delvings into Natural and Scientific Magick and the Christian Kaballah have given me several unorthodox skills, this isn't one of them. Perhaps that's a good thing, for I've lost friends, and more than friends, whose voices I would dearly love to hear again, and if I could still converse with them I might have scant time for the living."

"You'd tire soon enough of duppies and bone folk," chuckled Mother Patience. "Not much comfort in their talk." Anne wondered what Calico Jack would say to her, if she could still hear his salty baritone. And Mary's soft whisper, would it be so gentle and caressing after four years in the ground? If only there was more rum. But no, she was too close to puke and stupor as it was, and surely this strange work required her wits.

From somewhere, Mother Patience had produced a wooden wand with a dried chicken foot at one end and the long black tail feather of a Doctor Bird at the other. "Be still, both of you, else you make it difficult." Poking her pink tongue out between her dark lips, she swayed with surprising suppleness, whisking her wand over the sand around them, tracing not decipherable words as Constantine had done on the tavern table, but patterns as seemingly random as the ones low, windswept branches make at a beach's edge. "Put Captain No-Body down between us," she said, grinning wide at her own pun, "and I'll have him talking soon enough."

Constantine placed the head in the center of the woven mat so that it was surrounded on all sides by their knees, its tangled hair forming a cushion that kept it from rolling over. Mother Patience scooped up a small handful of the bone powder, if that's what it truly was, and, bending down, blew it like a kiss between the former pirate's yellow teeth.

"Be closing your eyes now, and holding hands."

Once again, Constantine's hand seemed so small and soft in her grip. Anne hadn't held hands with a child since she was a child herself, but

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this was surely what it felt like. She didn't like shutting her eyes, not just for wariness of danger, but because of the faces that swarmed there when she did, Jack's angry red one on the gallows cliff, Mary's pale dead one in the gloom of what had served the Kingston courthouse as both gaol and wine cellar. But here in Mother Patience's house, she found a more gentle and unpeopled darkness behind her eyelids.

"You living keep your eyes shut, no matter what you hear," said Mother Patience sternly. "Now Captain Teach, time you be talking!"

The next voice was deep and male and not the least bit ghostly, with a Bristol accent. "By the devil's smoking arsehole, what the fucking Hell d'ye want with me, you coal-colored crone?"

"Me want nothing of you, Bone Captain," replied Mother Patience's voice with the slightest trace of regal scorn, "but these folk do. Tell them where you buried treasure."

"What, think they I had nothing better do with gold and silver than hide it in dirt?" boomed the male voice, which seemed to come from exactly the same direction as that of Mother Patience. *It's coming out of her, not the head,* though Anne. Once she would have dismissed this as the trick of a Market Day mountebank, but not after today.

"Not gold or silver, Good Captain," soothed Constantine's voice, "nor the sugar and hides you sold at Beaufort and Bath. But somewhere here in Jamaica lies a plain iron pot, like a rude kettle for seething oil from seal flesh. Despite its plainness, a Spanish priest forced you to give him a mortal wound before he'd let go of it, and you yourself were enough impressed by it to hide it away in the ground."

There were several long minutes of silence, during which Anne resisted the urge to open her eyes. When the reply finally came, it was much softer. "The dying priest said it was the vessel Christ served the Last Supper from. I pissed into it to show my scorn for such Popish nonsense, only to see my urine turn to pure clear water and rise to the brim. Nothing ever frighted me so much as that, not even feeling a boarding axe bite through my neck. Come Judgment Day, when we sleeping dead are called up whole again, will I be cast into an even hotter part of the fire because I pissed in Jesu's favorite pot? No wonder I spent my remaining years preparing myself for Hell!"

Constantine's grip on Anne's hand tightened in apparent excitement. "Fire may yet indeed await you, Captain Teach, but not because that cauldron was the Grail, although that may be what Brendan believed when he brought it to the New World. It's something older, with powers of neither Christ nor the Adversary. Now, tell us where you buried it, and we'll let you sleep till Judgment."

"Sleep is sweet enough, even with fire at the end of it, but quim is sweeter. Place me in yon red-haired wench's lap. I'll doze better after that, even if the part of me that would have most appreciated what lies between those fine big thighs fed the sharks and jewfish years ago."

"You are too bold, Captain Teach." Constantine's grip tightened further, as though he were trying to be protective and reassuring, and Anne found herself repressing a snicker.

"Always was, but that's my price."

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The easy sound of Anne's own voice in reply surprised her. "Don't be a geck, Toby, I've held much worse between my legs." After a few moments' silence, the head was gently placed on her lap, though she never knew who moved it there. Fortunately, it was motionless after that. *Feels no worse than a dried coconut or a horseshoe crab shell,* she told herself. *As long as he doesn't ask me to remove my breeches I'll be fine.*

"Oh yes, that's a sweet cushion indeed," came the voice, definitely sounding a few feet further away and higher than the thing in Anne's lap. "I apologize, Fair Lady, for my coarse speech. Were I still alive, I'd put silk ribbons in your hair and make you one of my wives."

"Nay, Captain Teach, you'd not do that, but I might tie such ribbons in your beard and make you one of my husbands." How much rum *had* she drunk, that she could banter so easily with the dead? "I am not some tavern wench, but Anne Bonny, late of the *William,* and, despite my sex, as bold a member of the Brethren as yourself. Will you not share your secret with a fellow Sea Rover?"

Laughter boomed then, so loud it seemed to come from every part of the small dwelling. "Can one of the Brotherhood be a *sister?* Yet I don't doubt your tale's truth, as I've seen marvels enough in my time, and this new one surely deserves some token in exchange, with my secret all I have for barter. Ah, to have met you when I was whole and full of breath and blood and fire! I tried to make my ship a merry Hell, but it would have been merrier still with such a she-devil on board! Listen, and I'll tell you where I buried what you seek."

The forty-seven-mile journey had taken all afternoon and the better part of a night in the rickety, two-wheeled cart drawn by a single sway-backed nag. Anne's arse and thighs were in agony; she would have much preferred to have come by ketch or other ocean-going vessel, but this had proved the easiest way to slip out of Spanish Town without attracting undue notice. A proper carriage or two-horse curricle would have been faster and more comfortable, but Constantine's purse and moneybelt were apparently not so inexhaustible as the magic cauldron he claimed to be seeking, necessitating the purchase of such mean transport.

Christian Sotheby had spoken more than once of Derbyshire, calling it a prime example of the folly of lollygagging in London while an Agent managed your West Indian estates, as the majority of Jamaica's landowners were wont to do. Built near the mouth of the Black River, the sugar plantation had floundered under a succession of incompetent, drunken, or downright larcenous trustees, who treated the slaves with excessive brutality while robbing their employer blind. When Derbyshire's owner had arrived with every intent to set things right, he found himself in the midst of a revolt. A Maroon raiding party had come down from the Cockpit Country, and the nearby garrison that might otherwise have quickly restored order was too busy chasing the raiders back to what the soldiers nervously called the Land of Look Behind, with the result that the uprising was entirely successful. Derbyshire's owner was killed, his great house and fields burnt, and much of his dusky property escaped to join their wild brethren in the thorny upland hollows.

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Moreover, there'd been no legitimate will, and now, four decades later, Derbyshire's aging heirs were still disputing its disposition in Chancery, where the case might well drag out through several more generations. The earthquake that tipped Port Royal into the sea had not confined its depredations to the eastern end of the island, and while the changes it had wrought to the coastline around Starvegut Bay and the courses of the Black River's tributaries had been comparatively subtle, they eventually consigned much of the plantation's acreage to salt marsh. No wonder that local tradition held this to be a haunted place, or that Blackbeard had chosen it for a hiding spot.

To the left of the rutted, weed-choked wagon road was a strip of beach, where crabs scuttled like the bent ghosts of tiny hunchbacks over a pale ribbon of moonwashed sand. Out on the bay, fishing bats dove like silent gulls after their prey, while inland, their smaller cousins chased a swarming constellation of fireflies across the starry canvas of the night. This side of sand and shell, the rustling reeds answered the breakers with frogsong and the incongruous lapdog yips of lizard courtship; the whole halfseen nightworld was either eating or fucking, and Anne would have been happy to do either, or better yet, sleep like the rest of daylight's citizens. But no, Constantine was currently doing that, his small, silkhaired head resting on her comparatively broad shoulder, while she took her turn at the reins. *He trusts me,* she thought, *me who could easily cut his throat and take his fine clothes and what coin he still possesses, could have it done it many times now, and he knows me for a villainous wench who's done far worse. So, who was wiser, Mary who swore she saw such good in me, or da, who called me the Devil's own vixen?*

Beyond the reeds and mangroves was a stand of logwood, and, beyond that, the skeleton of Derbyshire's great hall poked its ribs above hogweed and thistle. Here a broken wall, there a single column, and, black against the moon, the crumbled chimney that Blackbeard (or Mother Patience) had said to look for.

Suddenly, Anne's stomach rumbled louder than any frog or gecko, and Constantine stirred beside her. "I've never heard that sound from a woman before," he said thickly, "not that it surprises me to find your bowels as vocal as any man's."

Anne laughed and handed him the reins, stretching the kinks out of her neck and shoulders. "So, were you satiric when you addressed me with such former delicacy? Familiarity's the death of courtesy."

He rubbed his eyes, then fumbled for the ivory case that contained his spectacles. "Fair Amazon, there are times when you speak like one not unlettered."

Anne cleared her throat and spat. "And much good it's done me, too. My father was a Belfast barrister before his siring me upon a chambermaid brought him to disgrace and Charleston. He passed on a pisspot's fill of learning, though I've forgotten most of it. Still, I can read well enough, and even understand flowery meanings. If we survive this, you'll have to gift me with your Captain Johnson's book of pirates, which you say makes such free use of my not-so-good name. How think you the captain would react if I hied myself to London and addressed him in the too, too sullied flesh?"

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The small man laughed. "Annie, your capacity for surprising me is as boundless as the ocean's capacity for making me nauseous, albeit with far more pleasant results."

Anne clapped him on the back with sufficient force to knock his eyeglasses into his lap. "Why Toby, such sweet words will surely win my girlish heart!" Deftly retrieving the spectacles, she set them back upon his nose. Had it been daylight, she might have fluttered her lashes in coy burlesque, although in truth the night was bright enough to half discern such a satirical gesture.

He'd noticed this too, and was looking upward at the emblazoned sky. "In England, the stars always appeared to peep through the blanket of the dark, to borrow a phrase of Shakespeare's probably not worth borrowing. Here the heavens seem to be studded with them on the outside, as if they were chased with many jewels, like Milton's firmament of living sapphires. They give such light that the moon scarcely needs show his great red drunken face. But we should attend your stomach rather than the sky. Is there any food left?"

At Dry River, a higgler had sold them mangoes and plantains and a necklace of mudfish and god-dammies, salt-dried and fried crisp, but all that now remained were fruit skins and fish tails. "I'll be fine; hunger's no greater a discomfort than sobriety. Let's stretch our legs and piss, then we'll start digging." The cart behind them contained two shovels and a pickaxe, as well as rope and pulleys.

The tools soon proved of little help. Blackbeard had dug a shallow hole beside the broken chimney, but he'd covered it with fallen bricks rather than dirt, and these proved more easily removed by hand. Within an hour, lamplight revealed a plain black iron pot, no different from the dutchies in which Negroes simmered ackee and saltcod. It was large enough that Constantine could have bathed in it, although Anne's big frame would have been cramped, and thus too heavy for them to lift, even with Anne's considerable strength, and she wished that enough coin had remained in Constantine's purse and belt to hire a jobber gang from a freelance slave driver, even though that would have made it nigh impossible to have kept their whereabouts secret from any pursuers.

However, despite his small smooth hands, Constantine proved to have some mechanical skill, and contrived a method of using the ropes and pulleys (along with planking and the muscles of the aged draft horse, which he unhitched) to haul the pot up into the cart. She'd wondered if he was going to test its alleged powers, for both her remaining skepticism and empty belly would have been satisfied if she could but cast the scraps of their last meal into it and watch it fill to the brim with whole fresh plantains and new-fried fish. But what if it didn't? She had somehow acquired no small affection for this strange, delicate monkey-man, and did not wish to see him revealed as suffering from delusions. No, not just yet.

Dawn could not be far off, yet it seemed much darker than before, as the now-heavier cart protested each foot of the pitted road that threaded along the bay. Stars and moon retreated behind a veil of cloud, and fog was rolling in over the murmuring breakers, cooling the sweat that glued Anne's shirt to the small of her back and her breeches to her buttocks. That damp blan-

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ket seemed to dull the spirits of the frog and lizard chorus, so that the only sounds were the muffled waves, the dull metronome of hoofbeats, and the creaking discord of the cart. In such sullen darkness, even a white person might half-hear duppies moaning in the unseen reeds.

"So we don't go directly to Heaven or Hell when we die, but are worm-food until judgment?" asked Anne, having nothing better to stave off clammy silence than that grim query.

She could see the barest dark shape of the man beside her, where an hour ago she could have discerned the motion of his speaking mouth. "Assuming that there shall be a judgment, something which the Deists who believe that God made the world and then drew apart from it would dispute. But no, nothing in the Gospels indicates the immediacy of Hell or Heaven, despite the Italian poet's dream."

Anne mulled this over. "Maybe not, but the priests say otherwise. Or least they did, last time I bothered listening." She felt, although she could not see, his small hand on hers, and, knowing little of horses despite her plantation girlhood, wondered how theirs could keep to the road.

Constantine snorted. "The Church fathers decided Christian folk would be better behaved if judgment were death's immediate denouement, rather than some as yet unwritten sequel. Therefore, we've been taught to speak of our departed as though they're already breakfasting in Heaven or Hell, rather than still slumbering in the bedclothes of decay. Damn me, but it's dank and dark! Something unnatural is afoot."

Their horse had stopped, and now it made a low and most unequine sound, more groan than nicker. Constantine fumbled beside her. "Matches, where are my matches? Had I some light, I could find my book and read aloud a spell to lift this darkness. What a fool I am, to have not committed such a thing to memory!"

"And for many another reason, also," said a soft and cultured voice from no place in particular. "Really, Tobias, our former masters would be disappointed, to find you so easily waylaid as this!"

His hand left Anne's, and she felt rather than saw him sit bolt upright beside her. "*Your* former masters, Edmund. They are still mine." Then softer, "Have your pistols ready, Annie."

And then the fog was gone, like mist clearing from a mirror when a window is opened. With it went the clammy darkness, for the first rays of sun shone bloody on the bay, silhouetting a two-masted lugger at anchor there. No more than twenty yards from where their cart had halted, a pinnace of sixteen oars had been hauled up the brightening beach. What must be its former occupants were now beside them, at least ten armed men, most of whom Anne recognized, standing all in a line and holding hands like children. Letting go of each other with some visible embarrassment, they rubbed their eyes and shook their heads, some muttering curses, others prayers.

They couldn't see in the dark fog, thought Anne, *but he could, and he led them up the beach and straight to us.*

The man she was looking at could be none other than Constantine's Captain Edmund Love. At first, she might have taken him for a Quaker, what with his black hat and coat and breeches, his white hose and buck-

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led shoes. He wore no firearm, but the slim rapier at his side belied the pacific first impression.

Without preamble, she raised both pistols, cocked and fired, then lashed the reins and shouted wordlessly at the quivering horse. Powder smoke stung her eyes, her eardrums echoed with the twin shots, but despite such loud inducement, the cart did not move. When the smoke cleared, everything remained as frozen as it had when Gouger shot Constantine in the tavern. As before, she found herself looking on with strange detachment, no detail more important than another. The horse still shivered in its tracks, shaking its head from side to side, ears cocked and eyes rolled back to white, as if being invisibly restrained from forward motion. The man who must be Captain Love no longer wore his broad hat. Several of his men, including Nate Whiskey, were aiming pistols at them.

The black-clad man gestured for these to lower their weapons. "Really, Tobias, did you not tell your whore that I'm naturally and permanently a Hard Man, with no need of a protective spell like the one you used in Spanish Town?"

"Mistress Bonny is not a whore," said Constantine with what Anne recognized as the calm of resignation. Absurdly, she was gladdened by this unnecessary defense.

Captain Love, whom Anne realized could be no taller than Constantine and even more slender, rubbed a powder smudge on his high pale brow with a slim forefinger, which he then ran through his sleek black hair. His features were very delicate, even more girlish than Mary's had been, and his large eyes just as dark, but the mischief in them had none of Mary's tenderness. "Whatever else she is, she's a damn good shot. Both balls struck me, in the forehead and the chest. Such wounds would have been instantly fatal, were I not Hard. Do you know how rare that is?"

"That poxied bitch has the Devil's luck," crowed Nate Whiskey, "but it's run out now."

The small dark-haired, pale-faced man never took his eyes off Anne and Constantine. "Mister Whiskey, if you speak without being spoken to again, I may give Mistress Bonny leave to reload and shoot you in the groin. I'm sure she has much fight left in her, and will be more cooperative if she but maims someone first."

"How did you find us?" asked Constantine, wiping his fogged spectacles on his sleeve with a nonchalance belied only by a slight tremble of his hand, which Anne suspected was as due to anger and frustration as fear.

Captain Love cocked his small neat head at them with the hard-eyed alertness of a hawk and the intelligence of a parrot. "Like Onan, you spilled your seed, although in your case it was on our bedsheet rather than the ground. While you were at your ablutions, I scraped it into a vial, thinking it might come in handy. More recently, I mixed the dried crust of it into a half-spoon of Quicksilver, and first let that bright drop crawl along a map, then a calendar and clockface. That told me where we must drop anchor, and at what day and hour we might waylay you along this spot of beach." He bowed his head to Anne. "I hope it doesn't shock you, Mistress Bonny, to learn that Mister Constantine and I were more than colleagues, once upon a not-so-distant time."

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She spat. "I've been a pirate, you silly ponce, and care not that two men may lie together."

Their captor smiled, revealing a host of small white teeth, unstained by time, diet, or tobacco. "Yaas," he drawled, "your sort would be even more at ease with buggery than the common sailor is. It should not surprise me to hear that you've administered as well as received it. Perhaps with an artificial cock, rather like the celebrated Dutch trooper's wife, who followed her husband to war and used a brass one to piss."

Constantine stood up. "I'm going to kill you, Edmund."

The other man bowed. "Anything is possible in the fullness of time, but at this moment, it looks exceedingly unlikely. Now come down from there, both of you, and help my men unload your cargo."

There was no help for it. Nate Whiskey took Anne's cutlass, but when he moved to do the same thing with Constantine's rapier, his employer waved him away. Constantine gave no visible reaction, but this gesture irked Anne, as she thought it less a mark of respect than contempt for what was perceived as his harmlessness. *He fought quite well in the alley,* she thought, *and was bloody brave in the tavern.*

They rolled the cauldron out of the cart, off the road, and down the beach, finally setting it upright not far from the boat, out of which Captain Love then directed them to heave so large and heavy a barrel that Anne was surprised that the pinnace had been able to get it and eleven men safely ashore. This container was then rolled along the sand and upended beside the cauldron. "It is time to test the properties of this treasure," said Love, looking out at morning's glitter on the waves. "Someone fetch the pickaxe that Tobias was so considerate as to bring with him."

"Wait," wheezed Constantine, gasping from his labors. "Before testing its greatest property, you should subject its lesser ones to experiment. By not doing so, you're depriving your men of the opportunity to drink. You lads like a good drink, d'ye not?"

Several in Love's gang of louts growled their assent. "Would there was some to be had!" said a big fellow whose face was half bearded, half shaven, no doubt to let the knife cut that ran from his left cheek to his chin heal more cleanly.

"There is," said Constantine. "More than you've seen in your life, and free for the taking, if but one of you has a small flask with a drop left in it."

"Nate surely has such about him," said Anne, perceiving a glimmer of Constantine's intent. *He recalled my telling him that drink is the downfall of most pirates.* It was good to have a man actually remember something she'd said the day before.

Nate Whiskey looked more shifty-eyed than usual. "What if I do? It's mine by right, and I'll not be wasting it on some trick."

"No trick, but a true marvel," soothed Constantine, "and you need only spare the smallest drop. Pour such in that cauldron and it will fill to the brim, and in so doing become finer and more potent than it was before. What you see before you is no ordinary cookpot, but one of the Spoils of Annwn, wrested by Arthur himself from the Otherworld, and later brought to these shores by Saint Brendan the Navigator. It has several miraculous properties, but the most practical is its ability to serve as a

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veritable Cauldron of Plenty, so that he who possesses it never need be without the finest food and drink."

The pirates muttered amongst themselves, some in derision but others in true wonder, and then Half-Beard turned to their leader. "Captain Love, is what this mad fellow says true?"

Love's smile lacked warmth but not humor. "Indeed, and his madness that of the fox. He would delay us on this beach by having you men get festive with spirits, rather than putting the cauldron to its ultimate test and then getting on our way."

"Well," said Nate Whiskey, dubious but intrigued, "it's not as though we risk discovery by aught but mulatto fisherfolk, and they'd not dare meddle."

"True enough, Nate," said Anne in a far friendlier tone than she normally used on his sort. "Besides, even if you have signed no Articles of Federation with Captain Love, you are still of the Sweet Trade, and as such no man's mere lackey, for all that he addresses you as one. Go ahead and spill a drop of your namesake into that pot and let us see what happens."

His tin flask was already in his hand, and without looking at his employer, he stepped to the cauldron and poured a tiny amount into it.

Ignoring the scowling Captain Love, the mob pressed forward, and Constantine and Anne with them. By the time Anne could see inside, the vessel was already half full of amber-hued, strong-smelling liquid, and the level rapidly rising, halting only when it reached the pitted brim. *Is it to be all marvels then, every day until the grave?* she thought, feeling as dizzy as if she'd already drunk what her nose suggested might be very fine whiskey indeed. This shimmering honey-colored circle, no more than four feet across and four deep, bounded and bottomed by the plainest cooking iron, seemed more wondrous than all the vasty heaving sea, the first time she found herself beyond sight of land.

"Dare any man taste it?" prodded Constantine.

They needed no further prompting. Like hogs at a trough, the pirates jostled each other for room to cup their hands or even dip their faces. One small, crafty-faced fellow ran to the boat and came loping back with a bucket. "Fill this, and then we can pass it around!"

Love walked close to Anne and Constantine. "You think to hinder me, but I shall turn this to my advantage. Such men as these are as willingly paid in whiskey as in gold, and will all the more gladly serve the man with an inexhaustible source of it. And more than that, the final test of the cauldron's power is one that will affright them sorely, and is best performed with their senses lulled. Come, sit with me in the shade of that palm, and we will wait for them to drink their fill. Have either of you tobacco?"

But an hour later, Captain Love's mood was less amiable, as he walked amongst his men, idly kicking several as they lay insensible on the sand. "Damn me, but I didn't expect them to drink quite so deeply, not in the first hour of daylight!" Stooping, he relieved the sprawled, snoring Half-Beard of two pistols nearly as fine as Anne's. Where another man's face might have been red with annoyance, his was so pale the sun glittered off it like a shoal, yet his voice remained softer than a noon breeze. "No mat-

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ter. There are several means to banish drunkenness, and I shall employ one shortly. For now, the two of you can serve me as they would have, no doubt with more wits and better nerves."

Anne looked at Constantine, hoping to convey with a glance that they should run toward the marsh, as there was none but Captain Love himself to pursue them, and he didn't look so very fleet afoot. But no, her companion (in truth, she no longer thought of him as employer) wore a face of resigned determination, mixed with no little curiosity. "Yes, we should see this thing through to the end. I was a fool to think otherwise."

Love's smile was wider now, although no kinder than it had been before. "Good Tobias, I knew your desertion would only be temporary. Your she-pirate would, I think, shield your body with her own, giving you another chance to bolt, but then you'd never know if the cauldron can truly revive the dead."

Had I been thinking to do that? In truth, Anne could not completely deny the possibility of such intention, but this new revelation was intriguing enough to banish other thoughts. "Any dead?" She thought of Mary and Jack, rotting in unmarked graves.

Captain Love motioned them toward the standing barrel. "If the remains are reasonably intact. Tell me, Tobias, do you still have Captain Teach's head?"

"No," he replied, not offering further explanation. It had remained with Mother Patience, to do with as she would.

"Pity, for it would be an interesting experiment to see what happens when such remains are incomplete. For now though, I have brought along one who is every bit as infamous as Blackbeard, and whose various parts remain more or less attached."

For one horrible, hopeful moment, Anne thought he might mean Calico Jack Rackham, perhaps plundered from his unmarked grave while Anne and Constantine consulted the Obeah woman. But no, her onetime lover had never enjoyed half such fierce renown as Teach. To whom then did Love then refer?

Constantine was already walking up the beach to the cart, where their poor untended horse had fallen in its harness, apparently having succumbed to the strain of whatever power had checked its movement. Anne watched him. *Run for it,* she thought. *You're out of range.*

Captain Love seemed to guess her thought. "He won't flee, you know," he said with mock gentleness. "Is it because he fears what I might do to you, or that he desires to see the cauldron's true power? I'd like to think it's the latter, you no doubt the former, but it's most likely both. Do we ever do anything for just one reason?"

Anne looked down at him. His age was impossible to determine, but in his delicate pale way, he had all the male beauty that Constantine lacked, more so even than handsome Jack Rackham. But rather than the sort to induce desire, it was the kind best at distance, like that of a bright-banded viper coiling in the sun. Whatever the course of Constantine's affections, how had he bedded with such a cold little creature? But then she remembered the first man she'd ever lain with, and how she'd wanted him, despite his unfeeling cruelty—or perhaps because of it.

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"Mister Constantine said he would kill you, but I think it shall be me who does that."

Love met her stare with one of equal coolness, then giggled softly, a sound more ominous than any pirate's howl or cackle. "He may actually do it some day, but I think *you* will not. Now prepare to be useful, for your breath will depart with your utility."

Constantine was back with the pickaxe. "I suppose you want me to open that barrel. Ever since Dover, I've wondered what's inside."

Love motioned for him to hand the tool to Anne. "Mistress Bonny will open it, I think. The Amazon has shoulders broad as many a boatswain, though I'll grant her face and form are not unfair."

Anne thought about using the pickaxe to test the Hardness of his own face and form, but he'd already stepped lightly back, and she didn't doubt that his aim was even deadlier than hers. "Stand aside. This is nothing, compared to such manual tasks as I performed aboard the *William*."

She swung, wood splintered, and a spray of what felt like brine splashed her face. Squinting against burning eyes, she swung again, and again after that, until Love's voice halted her.

"That will do, I think. Now fish out the man who has been my most honored guest, although without enjoying the roomiest of accommodations."

The barrel had cracked open like an egg, splattering more brine. Rather than reaching into its sludgy depths, Anne kicked its broken side once, then again, widening the split to that its more solid contents spilled out with the water. These lay there on dark wet sand, a darker, crusted man-shape, like a scarecrow fashioned of rags and pitch on a frame of gnarled black sticks. There was a length of very rusty chain about its waist and shackles on its ankles. Its head, a tarry coconut with maize-kernel teeth, lolled on an unnaturally long neck, also wrapped in a collar of iron links.

"Whose corpse is this?" The tar and iron suggested a life of violence and notoriety, as pirates and highwaymen were routinely dipped in pitch and chained to gibbets after death, with some never being cut down and buried. Poor Jack had been spared that much.

"I'll introduce him shortly," said Love, "if he doesn't do those honors for himself. Please be so good as to pick him up and put him in the cauldron."

The chains were firmly wed to bone and flesh by the tar, but even iron-bound and sodden, the lean corpse was less heavy than a living man, and once she had a good grip on its armpits, she managed to drag it to the cauldron. There, Constantine took its feet, and they were able to lift it up and lower it in, letting the dead man settle into whiskey (the level of which seemed no lower, despite the pirates' thirst) like a live invalid into his bath.

Anne was tempted to stalk to Captain Love and wipe her fouled hands on his fine black coat, pistols and invulnerability be damned, but then there was a boiling hiss, the smell of spirits and something else, and the whiskey rose up into the air as steam, though she felt no heat. With this, the ragamuffin corpse began to twitch and spasm. Its mouth gaped open, silently at first, and then poured forth wordless cries, an even more

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piteous sound than their horse had made when held fast by sorcery in the fog. Anne wanted to cover her ears, but then the guttural sounds were bitten off into words.

"Where am I? Oh God of mercy, what place is this? Is this Hell at last, and if so, why? Jesu, did I not repent? Does perjury hound me to perdition?"

Captain Love stepped forward and extended a pale hand. "No Hell, Captain William Kidd, but merely the world again, albeit twenty-three years older than when you departed it. Welcome back to the life that cruel Britain wrenched from you at rope's end, before displaying you by the Thames. We must contrive a means to free you from those chains and scrub you clean of tar."

The thin dark dripping shape was now standing upright in the pot, as those boiled by cannibals are thought to do, bulbous head lowered dejectedly on stretched neck. "I'd not do that," said Anne through clenched teeth and rising gorge. "Naught else seems holding him together."

"The cauldron gives life, or at least some semblance," said Constantine, his scrunched simian face all cold fascination, "yet does not restore the body. At least not one that's been dead this long."

"All the better, then," said Captain Love with a barracuda smile. "He'll strike yet more terror into the shipping of the nation that hanged him! And he's just the first. I acquired his corpse years ago, and kept it in a barrel in my wine cellar until shortly before our departure. There are many others stowed there, wretched felons all, as their remains are generally the easiest to purchase. When I began my collection, it was but a youthful folly; I did not expect to see any of my charges ever move or speak, but kept them only for idle study. What a happy chance that was!"

"Why do such a thing?" asked Constantine. "This is no judgment day, that the dead should rise and walk, and if it was, they'd shake off corruption and be truly whole. Nay, this is more like a carrion puppet show."

Love nodded. "True enough, but British shipping shall play Judy to this Punch. It was an uneasy peace that was signed at Utrecht. The governments of France and Spain do not wish their own navies to break it, but if the condemned dead of their onetime enemy do, how can they do aught but gain?"

"Madness!" cried the late William Kidd, his voice hoarse and hollow but the words more cleanly shaped than the rest of him. "Why should I wish to *become* the villain that perjured testimony *accused* me of being? Must that calumny hang about me like these chains? Has not my good name been restored, in all the years since my death?"

Love scowled. "You have the name of a good and proper pirate, the fiercest of sea rovers. Why think you I raised you up again?"

"You should have read Captain Johnson's book," said Constantine dryly. "He makes it plain that Captain Kidd considered himself innocent, the pawn of political expediency and the duplicity of great men. He was a fool, perhaps, and impetuous, but not the rogue that ballads and broadsheets have made of him. Men of infamy, like those of its opposite, have not always lived according to their reputations."

"Who are you calling a fool, you dwarfish ape?" snarled Kidd. "I have no

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sword, but by God, I can brain you with my very chains, as I once crushed the skull of an insolent bosun with a bucket!"

Constantine didn't flinch. "Which rash act much aided your prosecution, along with the conveniently missing French passes, the absence of which neatly changed you from privateer to pirate. Magick is not the only art by which words writ on paper can leave a man utterly transformed."

The figure slumped again, and Anne marveled at seeing such an inhuman thing adopt such a human posture. "Was there ever a more miserable wretch than myself? First Newgate, then Tyburn, and now this demi-Hell that you mock me by calling life regained. Damn your eyes, I'll be having none of it! I was at peace, and shall be again!" Saying this, it hooked a bony black leg over the rim of the iron pot and clumsily scrambled out, moving with some vigor despite the chains.

Captain Love placed himself in front of the distraught corpse, shaking with some agitation himself. "Nay, Captain Kidd, stay you a while. At least hear out the man who brought you back."

The figure held its head high, and Anne realized that Kidd must have been quite a tall man in life. "I will not, for that man is a villain, and these with him likely no better! I have no wish for such company, nor to be in whatever savage place this is, and would not even if my poor form were in a better state. I see before me the ocean, and whether it be Atlantic, Caribbean or Pacific, it brings the promise of oblivion. Now get the bloody Hell out of my way, or I'll make you as much carrion as myself?"

Anne laughed. "Why Captain Love, your guest is spurning your hospitality! He's too good for such as us, and especially for such as *you!*"

"Do as I say, damn you!" shouted Love. "Are you such a fool as to think life restored is easily thrown away?" Saying this he fired one pistol, then the other, the shots dislodging sludgy tar from Kidd's head and abdomen. Then, as if in punctuation to his argument, he drew his rapier and drove it into Kidd's sunken, soggy chest.

The living dead man simply looked at him with the holes that once held eyes. "Will you now stand out of my way?" he said, in a voice that sounded disconcertingly small and soft and human.

Love had gone whiter than ever, except for the blue-black hollows under his eyes and a thin purple vein in his high forehead. "Can you not see, you bloody fool? Having been once dead, you can't be killed!"

Kidd looked down at the steel projecting from under his breastbone. Grasping it between two skeletal fingers, he did not pull it out, but instead slid it an inch or so back and forth. "Indeed. I am transfixed, yet feel nothing. You say I cannot die?"

"Perhaps not," interjected Constantine, "but yon ocean is very deep, and there's restful darkness at its bottom. Better a loyal mariner should lie there, than slowing falling apart on a gibbet, much less walking about in pitch-dipped tatters. Perhaps, under the weighty blanket of the deep and on the silted bottom, Captain Kidd will be able to sleep."

Kidd nodded. "Indeed. Better lying deep than walking land like this. I was notorious enough before my hanging, and would be a most infamous monster now!" Without another word, he lurched clumsily toward the waves, tripping twice on his chains before he reached the water.

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"Poor bastard," said Anne.

His head was a bobbing black nutshell now, and then it was gone. There were no bubbles to mark his submergence, just an oily spot.

"That buggers all," said Love sourly.

For many long moments, they watched the waves without speaking or looking at each other. Finally, Constantine broke the silence.

"Dear Edmund," he said with unexpected gentleness, "your men remain lolling and witless and you've left yourself unarmed. Mistress Bonny and myself shall be leaving now."

Love walked in a tight circle, wiping his expansive forehead with a red silk handkerchief, a gesture that seemed more compulsive than necessary, as his brow remained smooth and dry. "I think not," he said, turning to face them again. "There are many more weapons lying about. I can easily enough pick one and come after you. Don't think I won't, or that I cannot still harm you even when you think yourself safely far away."

Constantine sighed and shook his head, looking noticeably older than the man he was addressing, although Anne was somehow sure he was the younger of the two. "My onetime friend and more than friend, why bother? Is it really worth the trouble?"

Love shrugged, a strange half-smile on his ageless face. "That question might be asked of anything. I do as I will, and that is what I would now do. You shall not leave."

Anne put her hand on her onetime employer's shoulder. "Toby, answer me one thing. Is it more important that the cauldron be delivered to the School of Night, or that it remain out of foreign hands?"

Constantine did not unlock his gaze from Love's. "The latter, I should think."

"And if I were able to put paid to Captain Love, and could make sure that no dead men would ever again be dropped into yon uncanny pot, might I claim it as my spoils?"

He looked at her then, less ape than owl behind his spectacles. "If you could truly stop him, I'd give you whatever you might ask of me."

She smiled and brushed lank hair from her eyes, shifted her weight, tensed and untensed her fists, shrugged one shoulder, then the other, steadied her breathing, felt the sun's warmth on her neck, the salt wind on her face. This spot of beach might be the last thing she'd ever see or feel, if the idea that was trying to be born inside her head proved as unhardy as her poor dead babe. "All I want right now is your rapier, but I will ask you for one other thing soon enough, or else for nothing at all."

He unsheathed it and handed it gently to her, his fingers brushing hers on the hilt, a touch that seemed to ripple slightly through his small frame.

Love's expression was haughtier than Constantine's, but it too had a hint of melancholy. "Mistress Bonny, you know you can no more harm me than I was able to harm our late guest."

She whipped the weapon once through the salty air, getting the feel of it, admiring the way light danced off it like a twisting fish. "That remains to be seen. You said you could use magic to rouse your men. I suggest you do so."

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Only now did Constantine ask the obvious. "Annie, whatever are you playing at?"

She wasn't accustomed to doing this much hard thinking, not in some time, and it made her head hurt worse than rum ever had. The sun was high above the waves now, and the wind off the water stirred her hair, caressed her face, and found its way past the buttons of her stained shirt to gently cool the hollow of her breasts. The sea was as green as Jack Rackham's eyes, the wavecaps white as Mary's best bonnet. It was a long time since she'd dared stand on a beach and stare out at Mother Ocean, felt her tides echo in the veins. *The world's better part,* she thought; *so clean and wide and manless*. She had no qualms about turning her back on Captain Love. They were both actors now, and he'd patiently await her speech.

"Toby, if you and I go from here, he'll simply do it again. You know that. More poor corpses will be dropped in the cauldron to twitch like froglegs in a skillet. Can't have that, can we?"

Constantine walked close beside her, his hand on the one with which she held the sword, although he made no move to take it from her. "But how can we stop him?"

She leaned into him and whispered. "Leave that to me. Is he as impervious within as without?"

Intrigue glimmered behind his spectacles. "I think not. Poison should work, but how plan you to administer it?"

She bent to kiss his cheek. "No poison, but something more direct. Have faith, as I did when you cast your spell." Gently shaking off his hand, she raised the sword to Love. "Please make your men sober, sir. We'll need witnesses to our duel."

His smile was very arch. "And why is that?"

She felt the weight of the rapier. Not much like a cutlass, but Mary had killed more than one man with so slim a sticker. "I'm not big as if you," she'd said, "and must tire with a heavy blade. Here, let me show you how to thrust with my pretty needle." It had been a short lesson and took place years ago, but there wasn't much said or done by Mary that Anne had forgotten.

"I am challenging your captaincy. Won't mean much, if your men aren't sensible enough to see and hear it."

Love laughed so hard he looked like he needed to sit down. "Madame, my commission was in the Guards."

"Meaning you bought your rank."

His smile indicated no offense. "Indeed, but the point is that it's not nautical, much less piratical, and not to be undone by the outcome of a fight, even if you were somehow able to harm me. These poor louts follow me because I pay them and they fear me. We've signed no articles of your sea-rat's brotherhood."

She nodded. "Mayhap not, but they are of it and abide by its rules, just the same. If I kill you, as I intend to, and can pay them, as I will be able to once I possess that cauldron, they'll follow more readily than they followed you, even the ones like Nate Whiskey who once cursed my name. Just as long as I do it legal. So rouse them, please." The wind chose that

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moment to raise her hair about her shoulders, and she felt childishly proud of how fierce and formidable she might just look.

Indeed, Love seemed impressed. "You put on a fine show, Mistress Bonny, one that shan't be wasted on just us. Besides, it should make these dogs easier to manage. They fear me, but they also fear you, and will dread me even more once you're dead by my hand. Even that doltish Captain Kidd must have known the value of fear, else he'd not found it necessary to brain his bosun."

Reaching into his purse, he produced a small disk of what looked like dark violet quartz, the size and rough shape of a guinea, which glittered with royal fire in the sunlight. "Amethyst, the Stone of Venus. From *amethystos,* meaning 'remedy for drunkenness.' By itself, the crystal prevents inebriation, but if properly worked, it's also an effective cure. I guessed it might come in handy, as the sort of rough fellows I must needs hire are notorious for drinking themselves useless."

He walked to the nearest pirate, the big fellow with half a beard that he'd previously relieved of two pistols. Now he took the unconscious man's cutlass, which he used to draw a crude circle about him in the sand. Placing the amethyst on the man's forehead, Love walked widdershins around him, murmuring "siccus, siccus, siccus."

Half-Beard groaned and heaved, eyes fluttering open to the red-veined whites, his face suddenly flushed and glistening, his healing cut flaring so redly that Anne half-expected to see blood bursting through the scab. His heels drummed on the sand, his mouth gaped, and his hands clenched and unclenched like dying crabs. Heat emanated from his twitching body in a palpable wave, along with the stink of sweat, urine, and spirits, and a host of lice and fleas swarmed off him, as visible against the white sand as pepper spilled on salt.

His gasps turning into hacking coughs, he spasmed into a sitting position, his arms clasped tightly round his knees. For a moment, he sat like that, facedown and shaking, beads of sweat glittering on his bald spot, which flared so brightly it might have been a rash. Then, the shakes subsiding, he raised his head and looked at them with a surprisingly clear gaze, his features already resuming their normal color.

"Bloody Hell, but that's strong whiskey!"

Retrieving the amethyst from where it had fallen, Love then repeated the procedure for the rest of his men. The results were the same as for Half-Beard, with the exception of Nate Whiskey, who remained motionless even after Love poked him with the cutlass and then inserted the crystal into his half-open mouth. After a moment's examination, he was pronounced expired from his excess of drink, which caused several of his mates to laugh loudly at the irony of whiskey being Whiskey's bane, even as they rifled his person. "'Plures crapula quam gladius,'" said Love in a tone of cold amusement.

The other pirates all seemed as heated by the amethyst's curative powers as if they'd been locked in a sweat box for punishment, and many of them stumbled into the surf to cool their fevered brows, but none vomited, or showed any signs of headache or the other expected symptoms of a binge. Captain Love's cure was apparently potent indeed. Anne wondered

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if the restorative could be self-inflicted. *I must remember to take that stone from him after I've killed him,* she thought, *if kill him I truly can.*

"Mistress Bonny wishes a duel," said Captain Love with only the slightest hint of flippant mockery. "So rest yourselves a bit, whilst I sport with her, as I'd never refuse the request of a true lady." Several of the men laughed at that, while more whispered among themselves, their expression suggesting they were making wagers. "When I'm done, we must get the cauldron aboard the lugger, and from there it's to the port at Savannah La Mar, where you'll all be paid in coin and whiskey before I take passage back to Europe." Constantine shot Anne a glance that so much as said *Europe, but not England.* "Perhaps some of you are harboring thoughts of keeping the cauldron for yourselves, believing a lifetime of free food and drink better than anything I could pay you. You've already seen two demonstrations of my powers; first when I bound our quarry in fog and led you directly to them, and then when Mistress Bonny could not harm me with her pistols at close range. However, some points need the stress of repetition to be truly understood. I know you consider this fierce Amazon as dangerous as any mortal man. If, despite her skill with a blade, she cannot harm me, what hope have any of you of doing so?"

"They could still wrap you in anchor chain and throw you overboard," said Anne gaily, "or mob you and pour molten lead down your gullet."

Captain Love turned to face her, dark veins again visible in his milky forehead. "My dear strumpet, I could simply order your arms broken, then let these good fellows have their way with you."

"Nay," said the half-bearded man, who looked more thoughtful than his companions. "Despite her sex, Anne Bonny is of the brethren, and must be treated as such. A duel it shall be, right, lads?" The others murmured their assent, most with a speculative look that suggested they harbored little affection for their employer.

Captain Love coolly studied the cutlass in his hand, then looked at the rapier in Anne's. "More your sort of weapon than mine. Shall we exchange?"

Anne whipped her blade through the air again, so that it shimmered like a dragonfly's wing. "I think not. You already have the advantage of your Hardness. No point in giving you another."

Captain Love yawned theatrically. "As you wish. The result shall be the same, and I was only trying to spare you some suffering and leave you a less disfigured corpse, as this crude cleaver will make the more dreadful wound."

Not necessarily, thought Anne. Men cut to the bone often died quickly, from shock and blood loss, while those run through the body might linger for a day or more. But since she had no intention of being so deeply sliced or punctured, the point was moot. She turned to Constantine and saluted him with her blade. "Remember, Toby, faith!" Not waiting his response, she turned back to Love. "Have at you, sir!"

He simply stood there, the cutlass balanced on his shoulder, smiling with all his many small white teeth. The sun was at its zenith now, and he should have been very hot in the coat and breeches that were so black against the glittering sand, but no sweat beaded that smooth ivory skin, and his short hair was sleek but not lank. Perhaps a Hard Man could no

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more perspire than bleed, but if that was the case, he should at least be boiling like a crab pot on the inside, and yet he showed no discomfort. "Do your worst, Mistress Bonny. When you are done, be assured that I shall do mine."

He'd not put punctuation to that sentence before Anne ran forward and thrust, with such force that her point's impact with his chest actually pushed him a step back. Rather than following through and risking a return cut, she retreated. He regained his balance, but made no move to come after her, instead inspecting the hole her point had made in his jacket. "Very good one, that," he said idly. "You'd have spit me proper, were I not Hard. Care to try again? Have no worry about my return blow, as I find your obstinacy amusing, and am prepared to extend this farce a while longer."

Instead, Anne fell to her knees, her face raised to the sky. "Mother Mary, help me! I'll repent all my sins, but please don't let me die here!"

Constantine started to rush forward, perhaps to insert himself between Love and her, but the big man with the half-beard grasped his arms. "No, this is her fight, and we must see its end. Whatever the outcome, she wanted this." His tone was not unkind.

"Really, Tobias, your wench disappoints me," giggled Love, who then turned back to Anne. "She's strong and fast enough to give good sport, but alas, her spirit seems quite suddenly departed. A pity there's no way to do this without getting blood on my remaining good coat."

Anne had palmed a handful of sand, and now, as he stepped forward and raised the cutlass, she threw it at his face, aiming not for the eyes but the mouth, experience having taught her this was actually the more incapacitating target, and, in this case, one particularly suited for her purposes.

As she'd expected, Captain Love beat his left hand upon his chest, choking, his mouth open as he spat out sand, and that's when she came to her feet, extending into the lunge that Mary had taught her. *Let's see how hard you are on the inside,* she thought, as she drove the tip of the rapier into his mouth with such force that it broke off in his soft palate.

Love sat down sharply, his eyes wide with shock. For a moment, there was no blood, just a protracted rattling, but then it bubbled brightly forth, mixing with the sand on his face. He clawed at his mouth, his body heaving, his fine buckled shoes kicking up more sand. *Of course,* she thought, *the bastard's never felt real pain before, not from any cut or wound, and is as unprepared for it as a babe*. She almost pitied him.

His death was not a quick one. He actually made it to his feet and staggered toward his men, motioning wildly for them to help him and making incoherent wet noises. None would offer aid, but withdrew from his stumbling advance with silence and hard faces. With no help from that quarter, he lurched toward Constantine. For a moment, they stood facing each other, eyes locked, one man swaying and the other stiff, and what passed between them Anne couldn't say, although she heard Constantine mutter softly. Then Love spun unsteadily on his heels and careened in wild figure-eights across the beach until his knees buckled and he pitched forward at the surf's edge. Anne strode to him and put her foot upon his head, grinding his face into the foamy sand. She may not have pierced the brain stem

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or punctured an artery, but he was probably already expiring from shock, choking, and blood loss. Still, there was no harm in making sure, and she put her other foot between his shoulder blades, balancing on him and pressing down with her full weight. He kicked once, twice, his arms jerked and his fingers curled, then was all limp stillness, the foam reddening where it lapped against his head.

Anne waited a few more moments to be sure, then walked back toward Constantine and the pirates. "That's done," she said, her heart calming from gallop to canter. "I make no claim on anything Captain Love might have on his person, or stowed aboard the lugger I see at anchor. Divide his belongings among yourselves. As for this cauldron that he sought, sign articles proclaiming me your captain and I'll see it makes us all richer than Brutus."

"Croesus," Constantine corrected softly. "I'm the one who turned against a friend because of his ambition."

Most of the pirates just gaped, a row of pocked and burnished faces with open codfish mouths, but Half-Beard's look was more appraising. "A she-captain, eh, like Grace O'Malley?" He scratched his peeling nose and fingered the stubble around his scar, then grinned wide and yellow and turned to his comrades. "Well, lads, why not? She's bold as any of us, and with more wit than most. If we can be led by a warlock, why not a woman?"

Constantine had walked a few feet toward where Love lay in pinkish foam, but now he turned back toward Anne, his smile bittersweet. "Daniel had your fierceness right, but he never said you were so clever."

She nodded. "Women need their cunning, even ones less dainty than myself. Give me not so long a face. I'm alive and so are you."

She could tell he was trying very hard not to look back at Love's corpse. "Indeed, and I'm as happy for the former as the latter."

She returned his rapier. "Tell me now, just what did your masters in England have planned for this most marvelous pot?"

He wiped sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve. "The study of its properties, I suppose. I am not of the highest circle, and thus not privy to all their plans."

She shook her head. "More than that, surely. Might they not wish to make much the same use of it as Spain or France? How many graves would be emptied, their occupants press-ganged into service?"

His eyes were a different green than Jack's, she thought, not having stared into them for so long before. His held a glint of gold, whereas Jack's mixed the deep gray of the sea. An omen, that. "I suppose there are some in the School who might attempt such a thing," he allowed grudgingly.

"I promise you," she continued softly, "the cauldron won't fall into foreign hands. Tell your School of Night that it was lost at sea, or that you could never find it. You hired me as a bodyguard, to protect you from Love and his rogues. Have I not discharged that duty?"

"Indeed you have," he said, briefly giving in to the temptation to glance back at Love's limp form. "For all that some portion of myself might wish you'd not done it quite so well. I never truly wanted Edmund dead, not even when I told him that I'd kill him."

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Anne shrugged. "Yet he'd have killed me, and you soon after." She wondered about that last, Love never truly having made plain his plans for Constantine. "Better the use I will make of the cauldron than his intention for it. Nothing shall be put it in it but further drops of whiskey and rum and other such liquid goods. And if it's used to make villains rich, well, at least those riches shall keep them from further villainy."

He nodded slowly, his smile somewhat less guarded. "I see your point and have no way of stopping you, despite my small thaumaturgical skill. Where will you go now?"

She turned back to the pirates, some of whom looked as if they were already awaiting orders and none appearing inclined to dispute her. "How does Carolina sound, lads? Blackbeard had a sweet arrangement with the governor there; I'm sure we can strike a similar bargain. After all, we can supply the coastal towns with tariff-free spirits without having to take aught from Virginia's ships, and thus won't raise the ire of the neighboring colony, as was Teach's undoing. Think of it; we can be smugglers without having to actually steal anything."

"Almost doesn't seem honest," said the half-bearded man, his lopsided grin even wider. That brought laughter. Yes, these men who not two hours before had conspired in what might have been her death were now willing to follow her, God bless their simple souls.

Constantine looked out at the two-masted lugger. "I'm no seaman, but this seems more a coastal craft, and not such that will get you safely to America."

Anne nodded. "True enough, but if such bold lads and I can't use it to seize a larger and more seaworthy vessel, we're unworthy of the Brotherhood. Fret not; I shan't break the terms of my pardon until after we've put you ashore at Savannah la Mar. No blame shall attach itself to your name, nor will any further danger be yours."

He wrinkled his monkey nose. "I shall almost miss such danger. Will you not come back to England with me? I could make you respectable, Annie. I have a country house, and while my inheritance isn't the largest, there's enough of it for two."

She kissed him then, causing the rogues behind her to snicker, at least until she wheeled around with a tiger smile and eyes fiery as her hair. "I've already killed one man today, and think none of you so tough-skinned as him." That brought silence fast enough. "Nay, Toby, there'll be no respectability for me. Your Captain Johnson could have told you that."

He extended an arm. "Daniel never knew you, and had but the stuff of rumor and broadsheets to go on. Who knows what fate he might have written for you, with more firsthand information."

She took the arm and walked with him to the edge of the beach, where cooling green fronds framed purple mountains and blue sky. "I cannot guess what ending the tale of myself might have, but dare say it shan't be one that you, your Daniel or anyone else might imagine." Foolish words, perhaps, but she found it significant that she had no desire to ask whomever had taken Nate Whiskey's flask if there were any drops still in it. For the first time since she'd stood by Mary on a cool and creaking deck, sobriety seemed more interesting than its opposite. ❍

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GUEST REVIEW

Alice K. Turner

THE FEATURE FILMS OF HAYAO MIYAZAKI

Before last fall, when my friend William took me to see *Spirited Away*, I had never heard of the great Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. The only anime video I had ever seen was an unintentionally hilarious porn take-off on *The Powerpuff Girls*. (I wish I hadn't given that silly thing away, as it had its charms, one of them being that it was puritanically anti-sex.) At any rate, at this showing, *Spirited Away* started off in English, then five minutes later stopped and started again (trailers and all) in Japanese. This disconcerted the youngsters in the audience, who apparently weren't up to subtitles, and within a short time we were just about the only people left in the theater. This was fine with us, especially with William, for he is an anime buff, and thus a purist. Buffs take their Japanese straight.

This small story is just to warn you that I know very little about anime, though I have learned a fair amount about Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli. I have read no manga, the graphic novels or comic books that Miyazki is also famous for (the Japanese and the French love them), and have seen none of his television series (which included at one time a series on Heidi and one on Anne of Green Gables.) I'm not a Disney fan. But I have seen every Miyazaki feature that's available on American DVD, and two that aren't. So this is a personal take, not an expert evaluation or a know-everything fan appreciation.

These movies are *Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro* (1979), *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* (1984; that's not here yet, but will be in spring 2004), *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Porco Rosso* (1995; also in spring), *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001). All of them are fantasies or fantastic science fiction. Six are aimed toward young people: *Totoro, Kiki* and *Spirited Away* probably more toward girls, the two *Castles* and *Porco Rosso* toward boys or men, though I don't know why the whole family couldn't enjoy all of them. *Nausicaä* and *Mononoke* are darker movies and perhaps parents should view them first to decide if the kids are ready for them. *Mononoke* was the highest-grossing movie ever in Japan, toppling *E.T.*, which had held that spot for fifteen years. *Titanic* trumped it, but not for long—*Spirited Away* sank that. The Japanese have virtually deified Miyazaki.

Girls first, though I'll save *Spirited Away* for the end. *Totoro* is a wonderful movie for very little kids. Mei, the younger of the two sisters in the film, is only four. Satsuki is nine. They have just moved to the country with their dad, a professor with a home office, and are awaiting their mother's return from a long hospital stay. (This is treated warmly and should not make a young child fearful; Miyazaki simply needed to get her offstage so the girls could run wild and also it

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gives them a place to visit; otherwise it's nearly a one-set movie, though an attractive set.)

The girls tear around the house opening windows to air it and come across a swarm of odd black animated dots, just disappearing into a crack in the wall. Mei captures one and runs to show it to her father, but there is just soot in her hands when she opens them. A visiting neighbor tells her that these are harmless creatures that live in empty houses and that they will probably be gone by nightfall—indeed they are.

When Mei's is left behind as Satsuki goes off to school, she scampers along a mysterious trail of acorns though Miyazaki's lovely summery garden. She sees first one furry creature, then a second blue one carrying a bag. There's a rip in the bag, and acorns have been dropping through it. They hurry into a hole in the huge tree in the garden, and Mei chases after them, running as fast as she can only to tumble—whomp!—right onto the chest of an enormous napping beast. And the next thing she knows she is awakened by Satsuki and her father, hunting for her. Where is Totoro? she asks, and when she tells her story her father speculates that she must have met the Guardian of the Forest. In a charming scene, the three of them bow in formal thanks to the tree for caring for Mei. Later, there is a hilarious dance around a magical manifestation of the tree.

Next time Totoro appears it is at a bus stop in the pouring rain. Satsuki, with sleeping Mei on her back, has two umbrellas and offers one to him. He loves it, listening to the raindrops patter on it. In return, he offers her a package of acorns. When his bus arrives it's striped, with eight galloping legs and a Cheshire Cat grin.

This is a sweet-natured movie, but it has energy. The girls scream, run around, and squabble like real children, dance and fly with Totoro (in a sort of reverse Mary Poppins way), plant their acorns, take a ride on the Cat Bus, visit their mother, have fun with Dad. Some critics found it too slow, but Roger Ebert has defended it passionately, putting it on his all-time Great Movie short list in part because it avoids American "family movie" clichés. As for me, it is my number one Christmas or birthday present for preschoolers—even boys up to age five or so—and a great house present for families. No extra features on the DVD other than scene selection, which should please boys wanting to study that bus, and parents who weary of a little one's endless appetite for repetition.

Kiki's Delivery Service is just right for the nine-to-thirteen-year-old set. Kiki is a thirteen-year-old witch-in-the-making, daughter of a practicing witch. Instead of going to a Hogwarts equivalent, the custom here is that a young witch must fly off on her broomstick (actually, she borrows her mother's) to make her own way in a strange place before returning home. Of course she will take her black cat Jiji (dubbed as an amusing skeptic by Phil Hartman; Kiki is Kirsten Dunst). Off she flies, rather clumsily, under the full moon—whee!—waving to the village of well-wishers who have come to see her off. By morning she has come to a fishing town (beautifully drawn in a nostalgic European style, rather like the Tintin drawings). And it has no witch! In short order, Kiki

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finds a room with a kindly baker (who is obviously and unremarkably pregnant—don't look for that in an American film for kids, animated or live!). But what can she do to earn her keep? She has no skills, no obvious talents, obviously hasn't been paying much attention to witch lore. In fact, Kiki is a ditz. But she does have her broom and soon she has the idea of using it to deliver parcels around town, not only from the bakery but also from anyone else who needs a messenger.

Things go wrong, of course—at one point grumpy Jiji has to impersonate a stuffed cat—but Kiki acquires a young admirer, Tombo, who is building a flying machine (she snubs him, but he keeps bouncing back), and then a really cool older artist friend, Ursula. Kiki goes through a rough time of fearing she is losing both her ability to fly and to talk to Jiji (who is flirting, meanwhile, with a sleek neighbor cat). But she rallies; when she makes a daring rescue from the flying machine she forgets her fears and simply *acts,* as a good witch should. All in all, a lively movie for pre-teens, about making choices, learning courtesy and confidence as well as responsibility. It's out from Disney in a two-DVD set; the second plays the soundtrack under the original storyboards, nice for kids interested in drawing. There's a little feature on the English dubbing, and the original Japanese trailers. A "B" for extras.

Miyazaki's planes, trains, and automobiles are great, and they make his "boy movies" rule. He's said to be an airplane hobbyist, and it certainly shows, but his robots are nifty too, and so are his boiler rooms, foundries, mines, and engines. The simpler of the two *Castle* movies, *The Castle of Cagliostro*, is based on a Japanese TV series invented by someone called Monkey Punch. It pits master thief Lupin III (grandson to Arsene Lupin, the French gentleman thief featured in several novels by Maurice LeBlanc) and his sidekick against the wicked Count of Cagliostro, a European Ruritania. There are cars to chase, a princess to rescue, treasure to find, a counterfeiting ring to break up. It's fast and fun and has a neat autogyro, but because it's based on an existing television format with style and budget constraints it doesn't have the startling originality of his other movies. It's simply drawn by comparison, and the most American-seeming of his movies; according to the cover notes it's a favorite with Steven Spielberg.

But with *Castle in the Sky* (hereafter *Castle*; the other one is *Cagliostro*) we're in a different dimension altogether. The camera moves up, up above the clouds to an extraordinarily eccentric-looking airship—on the hull we see a Jolly Roger. Pirates! Down we move below the top cloud layer, where another ship, a strangely Victorian model makes its way across the screen. Through a window we see a forlorn young girl refusing a meal, but we don't know yet that she's a hostage. Suddenly—action! Riding tiny air-scooters that look like dragonflies mated with ceiling fans, the pirates swarm aboard the passenger ship, led by Dola, the mother of all pirates, braids akimbo, hollering at the top of her considerable lungs, and looking like a cross between a Katzenjammer mama and Pippi Longstocking aged by R. Crumb (Cloris Leachman having the time of her life). Considerable ruckus ensues. The

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girl Sheeta, frightened when she hears shouts about a crystal that must be the one she is wearing around her neck, slips out the window, hoping to keep out of sight. But she slips and falls, head down, down, down.

Cut to the credits, one wonderful airship crowding the next, castles like giant layer-cakes sailing by in their stately way, all of them looking as if Leonardo or Jonathan Swift had designed them. (This movie was originally called *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* after Swift's floating island in the Gulliver series, but the title was changed to avoid offending Spanish and Portuguese speakers. I won't explain except to note that the term is rudder in Spanish than the translation is in English. In the English dub there is a heavy emphasis on the first syllable so that no one gets any funny ideas. The Japanese, of course, call it "Raputa.")

It's a grand beginning to a rollicking movie with plenty of hijinks and plenty of spectacular skyjinks too, sheer fun in animation and action and chock-full of magical things to goggle at, very much including the complex architecture of Laputa itself and its giant cockeyed robots (much better than the *Lupin* robots and very good at fighting in a pinch —no Three Laws for them). Sheeta (Anna Paquin) is saved by Pazu, a boy in a Welsh mining town (the town is as beautifully drawn as the more fanciful creations) who is building an ornithopter so that he can find Laputa, The two scramble to avoid their pursuers and find out the secrets of the crystal; eventually, they team up with the pirates. Mark Hamill, Luke Skywalker himself, dubs the smooth blond villain. This two-DVD set has the same kinds of extras that *Kiki* offers, a great chance to study those magnificent flying machines.

Porco Rosso offers many more flying machines, of 1920s vintage: we are in Italy at the start of the Depression, with Fascism on the rise. The film was made as a JAL in-flight movie "for tired businessmen whose brains have turned to tofu," said Miyazaki in one interview. It's a nod to the Red Baron, and to movies like *The Flying Leathernecks* and *Twelve O'Clock High*. Miyazaki has also said that "When a man becomes middle-aged, he becomes a pig." Which doesn't entirely explain why his mustachioed, cigarette-smoking, bounty-hunting hero has a pig's head. Porco was an ace Italian aviator in World War I and we first meet him lounging on the beach of his Adriatic island. He's called for a rescue. Sky pirates whiz through this movie too: the Mamma Aiutto (Help Me Mama) Gang, led by a boss named Boss and flying a seaplane painted with skulls, has kidnapped a swarm of little girls from a cruise ship. Single handedly, Porco saves them.

The pirates show up at the nightclub where Porco's friend, the lovely, sad-eyed, much-married chanteuse, Miss Gina, presides. An American pilot, Curtis, is much taken with Miss Gina. On Porco's next rescue he engages in his first aerial dogfight with Curtis, and Curtis shoots him down, leaving him for dead. Of course Porco isn't. In Milan, he meets up with sassy little Fio who says she will design the fix-up of his plane. She does (to his surprise), and all the women in her big Italian family—grannies, aunts, cousins of all ages—get together to build it

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(the men have been conscripted). When Porco and Fio get back to the island, whom do they find but the pirates and Curtis! Another aerial duel, for high stakes, is planned, and this time it's a circus, with every criminal low-life across Italy on hand for the betting, and the Italian air force on its way. The movie is short and sparky, with great stunts, a broad cartoon style and an ambiguous ending. Tofu-brained businessmen should have been pleased.

Nausicaä was developed from a manga (collected in seven volumes) that Miyazaki wrote and illustrated for more than a dozen years. Purists think it's the best work he's ever done. The film is not his best, but it's interesting, more somber than any of the above, more classically science fictional, and it makes a pair with *Mononoke,* which came out thirteen years later. Both of them explore Miyazaki's serious interest in environmental ecology. The pirated video I have, so dark and blurry that I can't read all the subtitles, is complete. It's *not* the infamous much-cut British version, *Warriors of the Winds,* that came out a few years back and so horrified Miyazaki that his deal with Disney specified that not one *second* be cut from any Ghibli film released here. (*Totoro, Cagliostro,* and *Mononoke* aren't here through Disney, but through Fox, Manga, and Miramax respectively.) But Nausicaä lives in a troubled world, and a certain murkiness is not amiss.

We first meet Nausicaä—where else but on her plane?—for she is an accomplished wind rider on a little glider that seems to have a jet-powered take-off. She uses it to monitor the troubling spread of the Sea of Corruption, a once-healthy forest areas that now, a thousand years after global war has mostly destroyed civilization, give off a miasma of poisonous spores so that anyone nearing it must wear a gas-mask that makes him—or, in this case, her—a basset-hound look-alike. She also heads off the Ohmu, slug-like behemoths with multiple-headlight eyes, from the still-idyllic Valley of the Winds, the small city-state where she is the daughter of the ailing king. Nausicaä has a kind of rapport with the Ohmu; dangerous and frightening as they are, she can soothe them with a wind-flute and guide them back toward the forest. (The derivation of "Ohmu" is interesting; Miyazaki says it comes partly from a Japanese word meaning "king insect," partly from the Buddhist "Aum" and partly from the *Dune* "sando uomu"—sandworm.)

Dire and difficult as life is in this post-apocalyptic world, it hasn't stopped human beings from their relentless drive toward war. Torumekia and Pejite are two other city-states (the original manga had more). A crippled Torumekian air transport crashes in the Valley and in the wreckage Nausicaä finds a chained Petije princess, who dies after warning that the ship's cargo is very dangerous. Indeed it is, for it is the inactivated terrible fighting machine, the God-Soldier, instrumental in Earth's destruction so long ago. And one-armed Princess Kushana, leader of the Torumekian military force that promptly descends on and overpowers the Valley, plans to revive this thing and to destroy the Sea of Corruption and the Ohmu with it—even though she is sternly warned by an elder that doing so will lead to certain doom.

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Meanwhile, Nausicaä goes home to find her father dead. Enraged, she lashes out at the Torumekian soldiers and only the appearance of a wise old uncle-figure spares her from sharing his fate. Kushana takes her hostage but on their way back to Torumekia a Pejite fighter, piloted by Prince Asbel, attacks the airship. All the survivors (including Kushana, who attempts to impose her bossy ways) land safely in a clear area of forest, but are promptly surrounded by Ohmu. Nausicaä lets the Ohmu feel her with their tentacles, and they go away, calmed.

Asbel and Nausicaä find proof that the Sea of Corruption is actually slowly cleaning the earth of man-made pollution. It becomes more important than ever to stop Kushana's mad plan. Meanwhile the Pejite are torturing a baby Ohmu (this leads to some spectacular stampedes of incensed adult Ohmu) who is rescued by Nausicaä and who in turn heals the girl. There are wonderful visuals of the various huge, mutated, and perilous insects, as well as the swamps, roots, tangled funguses, and spores of the forest.

The movie ends with some astonishing violence and an apotheosis, an ancient prediction fulfilled. It's said the director later regretted this ending, though it's quite beautiful. But, again, it may not be for some kids.

Even darker and more intense is the story of the boy with the poisoned arm and the girl raised by wolves. (Mononoke means something like spirit; the title character, San, is not actually a spirit, but Moro, the wolf who raised her, is; Totoro is also a mononoke.) *Princess Mononoke* was not a theatrical hit here, despite the Miramax ad campaign, which made rather more of an effort than Disney bothered to do with *Spirited Away*, which really *is* a family movie. What must parents have thought at their first close-up of San, with knife in hand and blood all over her mouth? Or when the amputated head of a dying wolf bites off a woman's arm? Or of a foundry staffed entirely with lepers and ex-brothel women? (When was the last time you saw *that* in a cartoon?)

But it's a gripping movie nevertheless, with English script doctoring by Neil Gaiman, and it uses Japan as Miyazaki never did before. It starts with a bang as a monster covered with writhing worms advances on a remote medieval village. Brave young Ashitaka (Billy Crudup) manages to kill it, but not before it has infected his arm. An elder tells him that this fearsome creature used to be a Boar God, but was cursed and now Ashitaka is too. Perhaps if he goes to the west he can find a cure; if not he will die. Sadly, he mounts Yakkul (who appears to be a cross between an elk and a yak) and goes off on his lonely journey. Steadily his arm gets worse and more painful, but also stronger —when he shoots an arrow at some rogue samurai it cuts off the arms of one of them. A monk, Jigo (Billy Bob Thornton), tells him of a great mountain forest and an antlered god who rules it.

Near this forest is Irontown, a foundry fired by charcoal made from trees cut from the forest, and run by Lady Eboshi (Minnie Driver). Supplies, bourne by cattle and protected by Eboshi's mercenaries, are advancing toward the gates when suddenly Moro, the huge white Wolf God, attacks the caravan. Eboshi fires a bullet that hits

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Moro, who falls into a canyon. Into that canyon rides Ashitaka, who finds two wounded men and helps them. Looking around, he spots the wolf and San, who is sucking poison out of Moro's wound. Through the trees, Ashitaka glimpses a magnificent antlered head, and immediately his arm writhes with pain.

The conflict is set up between the creatures of the forest (including San), who hate the humans and their smoke-belching factory, and Eboshi's town, which in no way is presented as a bad place. As in many Miyazaki movies, people work hard but don't really mind it; the women joke that it certainly beats their old profession.

Meanwhile Jigo turns up again, this time leading a group of hunters who want to kill the Forest Guardian to get the antlers of immortality. And the rogue samurai attack Irontown. (Never a dull moment.)

There's a lot of violence here, both against animals and humans. It's not cartoonish violence, but frightening, as are the deceptions and betrayals of many of the characters. Some of the effects are terrific, such as the transformations of the great stag, which sometimes masks its face and also turns into a primeval dinosaur-like creature at night, but some of them are also repulsive. There's very little comic relief—it's a serious and ambitious allegorical epic, and a wonderfully visual one. A good deal of it is digitized, a first for Miyazaki, and there does seem to be a special richness to the backgrounds.

Last and best, there's *Spirited Away*. I saved this one for last because I am simply in awe of this movie. The *New Yorker* has said that "it is destined to join *E.T.* and *The Wizard of Oz* in the top ranks of movie fairy tales and fables," and I couldn't agree more. The form is exactly that of the *The Wizard* and the Alice books: A young girl, this time a sulky ten-year-old, Chihiro, wanders into a magical land that certainly isn't Kansas. With the help of some of the creatures she encounters, she overcomes many obstacles till she can finally get back home.

Chihiro (Daveigh Chase) and her parents are moving to a new house, and her father takes a wrong turn. They leave the car to explore a mysterious tunnel in the woods. On the other side is what appears to be an abandoned theme park, but the food stalls are still functioning. Her parents settle down to pig out, but Chihiro wanders away and crosses a bridge toward a huge gaudy structure that will turn out to be the Bathhouse of the Gods or Spirits. A boy named Haku (Jason Marsden) appears to caution her to run back before dark—but when she does she finds that her parents have metamorphosed into pigs!

Panic-stricken, she runs back to the building. Haku warns her that humans are not welcome here (by this time there is a long line of decidedly inhuman creatures waiting to get into the bathhouse) and that she must at all costs find work. The boiler room is operated by gruff Kumaji (David Ogden Stiers), who is dressed in a formal coat and has eight limbs, which he employs in an astonishing variety of ways, ordering around little scurrying sootballs like the ones in *Totoro*. But Kumaji has no job for her, and when the housemaid Lin (Susan Egan) appears with dinner, it appears that Chihiro must apply to the boss-witch.

Yubaba (Suzanne Pleshette) is an old hag built like Alice's Duchess,

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and like the Duchess, she has a baby, this one a humongous giant named Boh. Three bouncing green heads attend her. She renames Chihiro Sen when she hires her—she has stolen her identity. And Sen goes off to be a housemaid and bathgirl. As bathgirl her first, and most unwelcome, task is to assist the Stink God—this is an excellent, long, complex, and funny scene, with an ecological message at the end.

But it is Sen's encounter with No-Face, a silent black-robed thing with a Noh mask where its head should be, that will prove most telling. Seeing it standing in the rain, she invites it into the bathhouse where, in short order, it creates havoc. It is not exactly what it seems. Neither is Haku, who gets in trouble of a different kind, from which Sen must save him. This will involve a strange train-ride to visit another witch.

The invention and complexity of this movie boggle the mind. The richness of the drawing and painting is staggering: I've never seen anything like the anteroom to Yubaba's chambers. (Miyazaki used even more digital imaging in this than in *Mononoke* but a great deal is still hand done.) But it's not just the dazzling technical wizardry—the painterly landscapes, the depth, dimension, and detail—it's the characters and story. The bathhouse is full of wonderful creatures doing eccentric things (meet the Radish God!). The train ride is spooky, but at the same time two tiny creatures bob up and down in eager play, and then fall touchingly asleep in Sen's folded hands. Even the dubbing is terrific, with a special nod to Susan Egan for making an unshowy supporting part so appealing.

And you get your money's worth on the two-DVD set. Aside from extras similar to those *Kiki* and *Castle* offer, a television crew documented the making of the movie. The result is fascinating. The scenes where Miyazaki (a very attractive personality) is trying to explain to a group of young animators how to feed medicine to a wounded dragon are priceless. He goes around the table with mounting disbelief to discover that not one of them has ever owned a dog, then orders the phalanx to a local vet to practice on two exuberant pups. The storyboards got a little shortchanged to fit in, but they have a great new feature: click on one and it takes you back to that point in the movie.

Lucky us, there is more to come. Miyazaki, in his sixties, keeps retiring, then bouncing back, and now he is hard at work on the anime of *Howl's Moving Castle*, by Diana Wynne Jones. The book seems perfect for him, though he's going to have to pull off at least one stunt that even he (nor anyone else) has never done before in animation. Of course, he may change the plot. He's already changed the castle. You can see a picture of it at: *http://www4.at-lawson.com/ghibli/ghibli_mot.shtml;* click on the small picture on the right for a 3-D model. But he gets another chance at Wales (and other places) and Howl could be his best-ever male character. It might be out, at least in Japan, by next fall, and if we're *really* lucky, the DVD in 2005 or 2006 will include another terrific documentary. ○

Alice K. Turner, the former fiction editor of *Playboy*, is co-editor of *Snake's-hands: The Fiction of John Crowley*.

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SF Conventional Calendar

Here's the lineup for the rest of the winter as well as the word on WorldCons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 2004

6–9—**UK Filk Con.** For info, write: **c/o Weingart, 17 Chapin Rd., Farmingdale NY 11735.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E-mail) awalker@weyrd.org.** Con will be held in: Lincoln UK (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Pride of Lincoln. Guests will include: Roper, Conway. SF/fantasy folksinging.

7–8—**Creation. (818) 409-0960. www.creationent.com. tickets@creationent.com.** Doubletree, Bellevue WA. Commercial.

13–15—**Boskone. www.nesfa.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. Stephen Baxter, Richard Hescox, B. Mitchell, B. & B. Sutton.

13–15—**Farpoint. www.farpointcon.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Bill Murray. Star Trek and other media SF/fantasy.

13–15—**Gallifrey One 15. www.gallifreyone.com/futgally.htm.** Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys (Los Angeles) CA. Dr. Who.

13–15—**Starfleet Ball. www.starfleet-ball.com.** Bournemouth UK. Tydings, Seymour, Dorn, Biggs, Yarnall, Sheard.

19–22—**Left Coast Crime, 2625 Alcatraz Ave. #332, Berkeley CA 94705. www.lcc2004.com.** Monterey CA. Mysteries.

20–22—**Con DFW, 2183 Buckingham Rd. #282, Richardson TX 75081. www.condfw.org.** near Dallas TX. L. Bujold.

20–22—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. www.visioncon.net.** Eugene Roddenberry Jr.

27–29—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. (540) 248-4152. www.shevacon.org.** Roanoke VA. Keegan, Butcher.

27–29—**Potlatch, Box 31848, Seattle WA 98103. www.potlatch-sf.org.** Best Western Executive. SF literature.

27–29—**NoSuchCon, Nonhuman Student Org., Box 3817, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie NY 12604. www.noncon.net.**

MARCH 2004

5–7—**MarsCon, Box 21213, Eagan MN 55121. (612) 724-0687. www.marscon.org.** Hilton, Bloomington MN. Biggs, Ford.

5–7—**MeCon, 12 Hopefield Ave., Belfast BT15 5AP, UK. www.mecon.org.** Queen's Univ. Rankin, MacDonald, Holden.

5–7—**SentiCon, Box 141276, Grand Rapids MI 49514. (360) 331-6714.** Radisson East. Adult fanzines.

7—**Invasion, Vicarage Field #36, Ripple Road, Barking IG11 8DQ, UK. www.tenthplanet.co.uk.** At the Central Library.

12–14—**Mt. Olympus, Box 3250, Glastonbury BA6 9WL, UK. www.kumara.org.uk.** Thistle Hotel, Bristol UK. Green.

19–21—**LunaCon, Box 3566, New York NY 10008. info@lunacon.org.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. S. Constantine, Whelan.

19–21—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. www.technicon.org.** Best Western Red Lion.

19–21—**StellarCon, 5701 Running Ridge Rd., Greensboro NC 27407. (336) 295-8041.** Radisson, High Point NC. Zahn.

19–21—**GalactiCon, 6636 Shallowford Rd., Chattanooga TN 37421. www.galacticoninc. galacticon@vei.netcom.**

25–28—**AggieCon, MSC Box J-1, TAMU, College Station TX 77844. www.aggiecon.tamu.edu.** Mem. Student Center.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $180.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $135+/£85+.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $75

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23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125+

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NEXT ISSUE

APRIL/MAY DOUBLE ISSUE

Our first April/May Double Issue, a supersized issue (do you want fries with that?), contains as much first-rate material as we can jam into it. This issue is one of the best reading bargains to be found anywhere in the SF genre, containing *more* fiction for a considerably *lower* cover price than the average paperback novel, and a richness and diversity of material that no novel can match—packed with nearly novel-length novellas, novelettes, short stories, and some of the best critical articles being published anywhere today. So, no fries—but just about everything *else.*

Our cover story by **William Barton** is an edge-of-your-seat thriller called "Moments of Inertia" that depicts the reactions of those faced with an oncoming Cosmic Catastrophe—and then takes us on *through* the End of the World to the surprising and challenging fate that awaits the human race *after* The End of It All. The evocative cover is by **Michael Carroll**. But our immense Double Issue also features two *other* huge novellas. First, **Gregory Feeley** takes us to an Alternate Venice for the tale of an ambitious merchant trying to entice Europeans to try a seductive drug from foreign climes, and the unexpected obstacles he faces in introducing the Western world to "Arabian Wine." **Allen M. Steele** plunges us into the middle of a bitter Civil War on the frontier planet Coyote, for a suspenseful depiction of an "Incident at Goat Kill Creek." And that's not anywhere near all that we have coming up for you next issue.

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

James Patrick Kelly returns to guide us on a dangerous visit to "The Dark Side of Town"; **William Sanders** escorts us around the town of "Sitka," and shows us what a cold and deadly place it can be for the wrong people at the wrong time; **Mary Rosenblum** peers ahead in time to view the fate of a posthuman "Tracker" in a strange far-future world; **Robert Reed** treats us to a surprising meditation on the real meaning of "Wealth"; **Larry Niven**, one of the giants of the field, gives us the unexpected true explanation for "Chicxulub"; **Kage Baker** returns to the vividly colored fantasy world of Troon for an exciting and wryly amusing study of someone who thinks he's "Leaving His Cares Behind Him"; and new author **Judy Klass** tells the story of colonists with nothing left to lose who dare to penetrate the core of a Big Apple gone frighteningly rotten, in "We'll Take Manhattan."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column makes some notes "Toward a Theory of Story"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column pokes into "Gallimaufry"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features.

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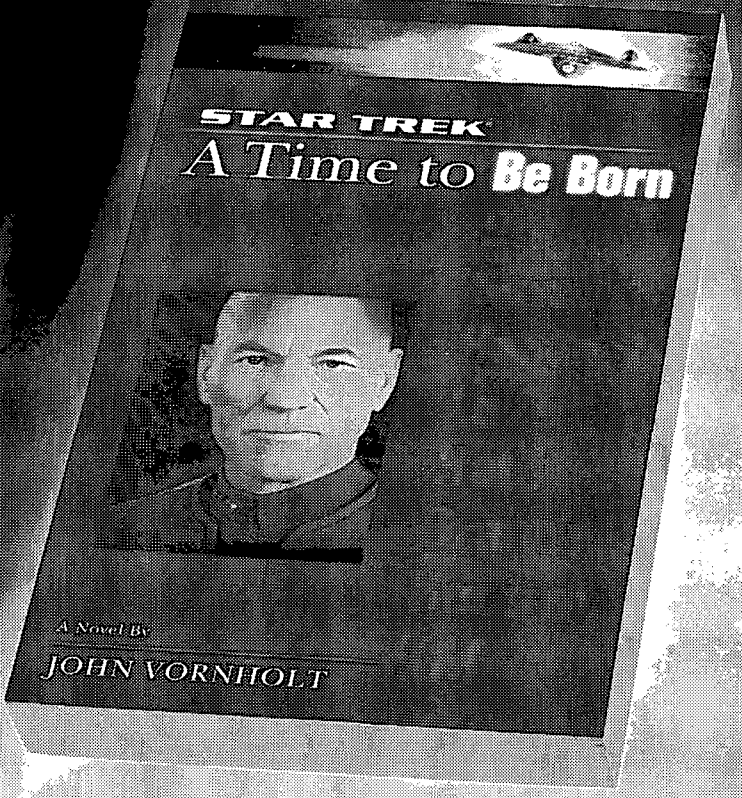

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